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Dagonet the Jester



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Dagonet the Jester

by

[Malcolm Kingsley Macmillan]

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ERRATA

- Page 2, line 18, *for* "was" *read* "rises."
- „ 24 „ 10, *for* "knew" *read* "know."
- „ 26 „ 1, *for* "Eidechse" *read* "Eichhorn."
- „ 38 „ 19, *for* "greatly" *read* "gently."
- „ 81 „ 15, *omit* second "
- „ 142 „ 1, *for* "propose" *read* "purpose."

DAGONET THE JESTER.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN I first remember Dagonet in our village of Thorn Abbey, he had left living in my Lord Sandiacre's family about three years. A bite of his at the then lord's wife had been too shrewd, and with many tears my lord had conducted him out of the Park gates.

"Park call you it?" said the Fool at parting. "The song-books mind them well of the time when your lordship's feet within

the fence and mine without would both have stood in the merry forest of Sherwood."

The old lord clapped him o' the shoulder and shook him with a laughing threat. But he knew that the Fool was no questioner of titles, fool though he was, and that he did but liken the strange leagues before him with the kindly acres behind him to make the leagues a little sweeter to him in thought.

Then did the Fool set his face northward, and he made straight for our village of Thorn Abbey. But he had not at first the intent to settle down among us. He had not made the best, said he, of the folly nature had blessed him with, to become a wise workman with his tools at last. "A light head," he told us, "was easily above its sphere, and twinkles into

princes' chambers to take notice how it goes with them there. The arms, look you, hang close to the side, as there's many a chink to dart through if your pranks are to have any salt to them."

With that he set on his way up a steep road, that curled round into a hanging wood and lost itself near a hermit's cave. This cave had a broad opening to it, and two narrow windows cut in the rock on either side. It was the blacksmith that came to seek him there after half an hour.

"Wilt soulder me bars of iron athwart this gaping mouth, master blacksmith? Then will I live with my cave's ears open to the world below me, and never speak word again. 'Twere pity of me if I could not creep through yon right ear, as Jack Miller crept into his lady's gown."

“Nay, thou art no lean fool,” quoth the blacksmith, as indeed Master Dagonet had by this time left leanness on the stony side of the hedge.

“A fat fool, master blacksmith ; but no foul fool. Your lean fools are envious ; and look you ! I envy you not those brawny arms, nor the parson his glebes, nor——”

“But you will starve up here, Master Dagonet. I am to bring you to the ale-house that is beside my forge, and when you have had food and drink I am to lodge you in mine own house.”

“And I in return am to blow your bellows for you, without doubt. But I would have you know that a lord’s jester has no stomach for coarse work or coarse fare. I will lie hard and feed hard, like

the holy hermit, my landlord. But I will not meal with a churl, nor moil with a churl."

"But word has come from the Hall, Master Dagonet——"

"Say no more," quoth the Fool. "Here do I make my bed. But take my thanks, master blacksmith. Your kindness is no churl's kindness. And for my lord, I am graciously inclined to consider well of his petition. But leave me for to-day, I beseech you."

And sure enough he lay that night in the hermit's cave. The fog hung thick on the beech-trees, and crept around the roots of an old yew that slanted like a velvet pall across the lusty green leaves. But the Fool took no hurt. He had never closed eye the whole night, lest the vapours should

take him at unawares, to rack his joints with rheumatisms. He had lit a fire of the driest twigs he could find, and safe in its blaze he had made a lordly meal of the broken meats and thin wine in his wallet. And then, when the fire was burning low and he was yet valiant with the strength of his supper, he climbed into a level field above the wood, where formerly had been leaping, vaulting, and shooting with the bow every Sunday, and now there was nothing but an unlawful sport. For, indeed, what happened there after church time was a kind of bear-baiting. The clergyman at that time, who was one that would not listen to the good Archbishop's counsel, walked about in his gown and bands, and there came to him hot disputants, mostly young and still out at trades,

who sore beset him with questions about grace. He, not always liking the form of their questions, would draw in his brows and wrap his wide sleeves round his crossed elbows, telling them sometimes that it ill befitted the graceless to have grace ever in their mouths. And then in their rage they would show themselves more graceless still. For, getting together some of the raggedest losels and some of the wildest wenches in the parish, they would form themselves into a ring for a morrice just at the place where the clergyman was soon to come in his walk. And as he drew near they would begin the morrice with most unseemly leaps and swinging of clasped hands. But because the morrice was most heartily allowed of by the Proclamation, the clergyman dared say nothing

to them. And this was what he got by persuading the tightest and cleanliest lads in the village to forbear their running and leaping on a Sunday.

But our Fool knew of these things only at a distance. He had been born under my lord's roof, and knew little of the town or of the country either. He had heard of such strange creatures as had brought back the discipline from among the Switzers, but knew not how they looked. So as he walked about in the field on his first night in our poor little village, where he was to abide for so many years, he minded not the tales about the reverend Master Crape and his trouble with the dancers—if indeed he had ever had news of them. It was a clear starlight night, he once told me, and there was no moon. He began

thinking about a masque he had formerly seen in Sandy Hall, where my lady, her daughters, and their friends, had danced the parts of night and the constellations. And my lady had her gown sewed with seed-pearls, like star-dust over the face of the heaven, and scattered here and there about her was a great rose-topaz, like the larger stars when the nights are warm and balmy. But that night, though they were liquid indeed, and their influences ran like quicksilver about the Fool's soul, yet had they points like icicles, and their blue was like the blue of steel.

“Even so my lady looked at me,” thought Dagonet, “when I said that a proud heart was like the frost that clutched the earth, and a kind heart like the sun that drew up the flowers. It was a thaw at the time,

and I showed her from the window how the poor, weak, troubled water ran away. Which saying of mine she took wholly amiss, as if I had likened her to an oozy puddle and my lord to Phœbus Apollo; notwithstanding her frosty pride flashed for a little when he smiled upon her. But I meant only that her pride was the frost, and that she was the earth, to be warmed through when it melted. And for that of the flowers, why she should look to him each day like some fresh flower. But whether now that sun of the world, her lord, finds not her blossom drenched and her bloom withered by reason of the tears she often sheds in spite, that cannot I learn. Certain it is, that from that day she has ever hated me. Truly a fool should be simple when he would deal in figures."

Thereafter, as it seems, the Fool lay for awhile on his back and looked up at the sky. And it seemed to him like the metal plate of a celestial chart, whereof the lower part was gray and dusty and the higher ridges sharp and burnished; but whoever should read it would read the reverse of that which was intended.

“Nay, no more night-watching for me, nor questionings of destiny,” said the Fool. “Truly the daytime is like my friend the honest blacksmith’s forge, where all is glowing and the iron grows soft; and the night is like an alchemist’s cave, where are blue flames and hard metals with a cold glitter. ‘Precious are they and perennial,’ said my lord, ere my lady had laughed him out of his studies. And so they are, my lord; but I am for the forge!”

The forge, however, was not as yet opened, and Dagonet was forced to content himself with his own cave, where were no flames at all whether blue or red. Before entering he ran a little to make him warm ; but when he had entered, he could not for a little think what he should do to comfort him, till he bethought him suddenly of a pipe which my lord had given him, together with some tobacco, in memory of a jest that ran in the house about the Fool's exceeding sickness when once, as a boy, he had tried to use the steward's pipe. But now he longed in real earnest to drink some of the tobacco my lord had given him, thinking what a comfort it would be to his stomach when food and fuel lay far from him ; which, with the help of flint and steel, he presently brought to pass,

and had solace of it. But it was the only time I ever knew of his drinking it, except one other, which I shall hereafter speak of.

At first there were pleasant little stings that seemed to shoot all over him, and then was he wrapped in a long fit of musing. And ever, till the last savour of the kindly herb had gone from the cave and from his own mouth, did that fit last. But his musing was not, I think, upon Erasmus his *Praise of Folly*, nor upon Sebastian Brand his *Ship*, like the musings of those fools who are very philosophers, about whom I read in some Dutch books when I was my young lord's secretary at the Hague. He thought rather upon what had led him to be a fool, and upon what he should do now, when his motley coat must wear out, with never a new suit for

his service. He knew well that the blacksmith, Tim Blenkinsop, would give him light work in his forge, and feed and lodge him well for the sake of his quips and cranks, which sure people would come from far to hear—even down from Kirk Holland, and over our ridge where the windmill stands—though they needed little of his craft in an ordinary way. Would not the very horses cast a shoe on purpose? That would they, if they were like the steeds in my lord's stables, that all turned their heads from feeding if he but stood in the door, so that their nostrils seemed each one close to the next, like a crescent of guns all pointing at him. And Dagonet never fed them save, as he said, with the husks of his own wit. The ostler, however, who never liked him, said

that it was because he mewed like a kitten when he came near the horses, so that each one thought he had with him one of those little animals which they like exceedingly to have curled up on their backs. However, I for my part must say that I never heard Dagonet mew like a kitten, though often would he crow like a cock to rouse me an hour earlier, when I was but an urchin and fain to ride a little without saddle, before my mother was awake to tremble for me. Which thing Dagonet contrived.

But he was by no means willing to enter the blacksmith's service. He had been a master fool, and would not be a journeyman smith. He bethought him rather of the ancient trade of cobbling, according to that sage proverb which tells

us "*there is nothing like leather*"—a saying which, I have long thought, seemeth to many of us the sager in that we do not very exactly understand what it would say to us. Dagonet, however, who had always been expert at every kind of botching, understood pretty well what the proverb meant for him. He would not, as he might be tempted to do, become a mere frippery-man—"a king," as the play says, "of shreds and patches"—so that every slattern and idle ploughboy should run to him when their clothes were falling to pieces. A great allurements to idle gossip and waste of mirth. Should he have it expected of him, like some common half-witted clown, to rally every heedless cookmaid who had scorched her apron? That would he never endure.

Better far to wrestle with the tough hides that should bind men's feet, and lasses' too, be they ever so light. For every decent lass must have one pair to hear the sermon in, and shoes likewise to be married in, if that should so befall her. And see you not that Master Dagonet was bringing it about that his work should be slow and small in quantity, but, in spite of all, pretty steady in coming to him, so that he could take it up when he wished? And that was mostly, he declared, when he was tired of admonishing the giddy world for its own behoof. This Dagonet always said with a sly twinkle; for he sorely misdoubted whether flighty brains were often weighed down by admonition so as to grow steady. But, however, Master Dagonet had determined his

course before he was gotten past the out-buildings of Master Ashton's farm, and some minutes ere he stood in the village street, into which you passed through two stone posts, which were indeed shapen blocks and fallen from the shafts of the former Abbey Church. But as soon as he stood in the village street he was met by his blacksmith friend, Master Blenkinsop, who asked him how he did after his watching, and whether he would not take breakfast in his house.

“As for my watching, goodman Blenkinsop, all was well with me, save that the devil tempted me in the shape of a kind of sooty Vulcan, who wanted me to blow his bellows for him, and sweat in the mines for him, telling me that in return I should have rich viands ever before me,

and peals of laughter all round me, like those of the immortal gods, whenever I spoke; and that I should ascend from the earth's bowels by golden stairs, finding at the head of them a golden cloud to crown me withal—a very fool of glory for ever.”

“And that you had grace to resist, Master Dagonet?”

“Yes; and fled up to the open field, where I swore by all the stars that never would I touch bellows nor swing hammer. But notwithstanding, Master Blenkinsop, I will break my fast with thee!” And he entered the blacksmith's forge.

Now this blacksmith was my father. I have not said so before out of a habit I have long formed, whereof the reason will seem to some very strange and to others

very forced ; but, nevertheless, to me it is very sufficient. For this long time past, and ere the late happy restoration of his gracious Majesty, we have had such swarms of those busybody mechanic drudges who were presently to reign over us and judge all the tribes of Israel, that methinks no one can mention one that has a mechanic employment without thinking of those haughty and snuffling apprentices that were pale with dreaming of their crowns and hoarse with droning of their sermons. Fierce and slaughterous were they till their indentures were out, holding up as it were swords of fire, while they flung down mangled texts from their preaching-carts. But afterwards, marrying their old masters' daughters, they first of all grew tame, and afterwards went

about with scared looks as if many most fiery devils were after them—the memories, I should guess, of their violent deeds, which indeed those sober and quiet souls their wives kept, like so many rods in pickle, to sting them into submission, if happily their pride should reawaken.

But indeed my father was no such man, furious toiler though he was. Very grave and very still was he when away from his anvil, meditating, as some thought, upon that predestined doom of sinners which Master Crape had often dinned into his ears, till from custom it found its way into his heart. But for all that he never spoke evil of dignities, and would fain have followed the old lord to defend his outraged king; but he prayed him to stay behind, considering his years and the loss of his trade,

and also that the war was never in those parts ; but it was on account of this loyalty of my father's that the old lord put me to the grammar school in Trentwick, and afterwards took me into his own house that I might receive instruction along with his own son.

But we are leaving Master Dagonet too long without his breakfast, which he will be sorely lacking after his long vigil in the cave ; and all to speak of myself, Aaron Blenkinsop, who was not yet born. That worshipful woman, my mother, who was as gay and lively in temper as her husband was solemn, received the Fool and the smith at the head of the wooden steps which led from the forge. She had sent for a flagon of Burgundy from the cellar of mine host of the *George*, "wishing," as

she said, "to let Master Dagonet down easily" from that high living to which he had been used at my lord's.

She brought out for him also a plate of sturgeon's roe, and several spiced meats, together with some fine manchet-bread, either to dip in his wine or to eat with the sturgeon's roe. For the dairy-folk were careful of their butter, seeing that it was ready-money for them whenever they could send it cheaply into Trentwick. And ever as she brought these things would my mother (only she was not then my mother) soften and sparkle under her glossy brown hair—that at least is how I remember her when she waited upon welcome guests. And trebly welcome must the good Fool have been to her. For never did I know woman

who more dearly loved a jest. And, moreover, she was daughter to the steward's wife at Sandy Hall, and glad to learn all she could about those she remembered in my lord's household.

This dear mother of mine died when I was about six years of age ; and it was just upon the commencement of the troubles, and before the king had left London. Those who knew me best and who remember my father, being for the most part ancient retainers of the Lords Sandiacre, tell me that I favour my mother in looks but my father in mind. For as the old blacksmith would sit for hours with his mouth half open, and his black eyes all on the stretch, but seeing nothing, so will his son, the secretary, do with those brown eyes and puckered lips which he

had from his mother. And strange it is that whenever the scholars of the Continent make mention of that little tractate of mine, *De Scurrilitate Antiqua*, they praise indeed my acumen and the aptness of my citations, but ever introduce their praise with *Aaronus iste morosior* or some such phrase. But once I remember, when I was in the Palatinate, I sat writing near a jewelled mirror in the cabinet of an erudite lord with whom my master was staying, and there passed through a scholar with whom I had once had a dispute about the meaning of a passage in Plautus. Now I had on a fur mantle that was fastened with a gold clasp. And this scholar, stopping to speak to the librarian who came in from another door, looked once at me rather hard and whispered

to the other "Eidechse." Now I thought at first that this was some scurril name for the people whom we call Huguenots, but whose name in right Dutch is Eidgenossen or "Oath - fellows." And I deemed it a point of most exceeding malice that he should liken me to those dark-souled emissaries of Jack Calvin, from whom in divinity I was as far as day is from night. But, sending the librarian somewhat angrily for a glossary of the Latin and the High-Dutch tongues, I found that mine enemy had likened me to one of those little creatures that spring from bough to bough and nourish their souls with beech-nuts. And looking in the mirror, such a semblance of that fantastic animal flashed upon me—as fur and gold clasp, brown eyes and bushy brown

hair were caught glittering in the facets at the glass's edge—that it seemed like the ghost of all the squirrels that ever were. And I fell a-laughing, remembering at the same time many of the strange pranks of men and animals which my mother had taught me to enjoy, acting them over for me to stamp them surelier on my memory. And yet now, alas! the thought of such pranks goes often nearer to making me gnash my teeth and grin with rage than smile cheerfully after my mother's wont.

But here is Aaron Blenkinsop flowing once more around that simple text of Master Dagonet with those glosses of his, which methinks, if they were oftener translated out of their curious Latinity into serviceable English, would not be found

such great marvels as the republic of commentators pretends. I were better advised to relate here a meeting of mine with Master Dagonet in the town of Trentwick, for the narration of which I have only the authority of the said Master Dagonet to go by. For, being of that tender age of one year and eleven months, I remember nothing of the matter. Of the meeting with Master Dagonet that is. For, strange as it may seem, of that visit to Trentwick I have still some faint recollections. My mother had gone to buy butter, which I well remember was stored in little casks of pale wood, such as I had just seen in making at the cooper's, where they bent round the pliant hoops that were to brace together the curved pieces that were standing round

to form the cask. And perhaps then, but more likely a year later, my mother told me somewhat that she said a cow had told her in great secrecy. And this was, that the good cow would assuredly give the farmer's wife more milk if she would only let her neighbours buy a little of it straight, without all those carriers' charges that were added on from its journeying to and fro.

"But sure," said my mother, "if I were to keep a churn, mother Ashton would spit out fire at it from her eyes and bewitch all the butter I made."

Now this I am sure of, that on that day in Trentwick my mother had on a plain brown dress, but that a little gold lace and scarlet thread was twisted in the handkerchief over her shoulders.

So I can guess for quite certain that Master Dagonet in his rough jerkin, who had come to take his weekly lesson in cobbling, which he had continued to take from Master Fisher in High Street, though he was now a cobbler of two years' standing and held most cunning at the trade—that Master Dagonet, I say, as he stood by the headless cross in the marketplace and lifted me on his shoulders, must have greatly resembled one of those Athenian mechanics who, in that piebald comedy of Master Shakespeare's, do chance now and again to hold converse with the Elfin Queen: save only that the poet's Titania doth seem to bear herself in a haughty and stately fashion, like some earthly or heavenly queen, and my mother had that very elfin look of one of the Good People

who haunt our country farms. And those who have seen them are ever at one in their accounts, videlicet, that their eyes are very bright and their hair for the most part brown, besides that it is tangled so strangely as to seem, while they dart their quick looks through it, like a damp briar-bush afire, that will now smoulder and anon shoot forth flames. Even so was my mother when I first remember her. Often, when she was kneading her bread or setting out her pots, a gossip would look in, like Mistress Cotes of the *George*, a worthy soul, but ever so oppressed by her cares that she would sink down with all her feathers drooping, and run over with complaints that yet she had hardly strength enough to utter with any clearness. As soon as she was gone my mother would

sink down also, and calling out to me, that was conning a chap-book on a little stool near the window, begin also to let her head roll round like Mistress Cotes, and to moan piteously, asking me at last if that was not a fine way to hearten up one's household. A thing I have never forgotten. And often as she was finishing off her work would she give me what she called a lesson. Now would she march before me, beating a toy drum to make me feel as a soldier: and truly the throbs of the sheepskin and the regular beat of her feet did stir my heart. And then would she take my chap-book, and poring over it would pull often at her hair to show what kind of a strange beast was a scholar. Then would she drive as it were at a plough, and bend as it were beneath a

burden ; ending often in a comical likeness of Master Crape, as she pulled her ribbons straight into a pair of bands. "There," said she, "son Aaron, is a map of the House of Life and some of its chief divisions." How sharply must she have noted things when she was but a little hand-maiden at Sandy Hall, watching oftentimes slyly from the cabinet of her father, the steward.

But latterly she had been much more staid and silent, finding that when her gaiety came softly, like a lamp from a recess, it did work a far speedier cheerfulness in her gloomy husband than when it sparkled like a cluster of jewels. And many complained and said hard things of my poor father, maintaining that these doctrines of reprobation made men repro-

bates indeed, careless in how dark a dungeon they prisoned the hearts around them, which would fain be merry. It will seem that the good folk of Thorn Abbey were very jealous for the happiness and contentment of men's wives, and this will prove so also in the case of Master Dagonet, who was still however, at the time I now speak of, the darling and delight of all. Whether those who did afterwards carp and scold were themselves such perfect yokefellows I could never discover. It is time, however, that I should tell you what Master Dagonet now said to my mother, and after that what he always stoutly maintains that I myself, though nothing but a tottering and squalling brat, did then say and do.

“Ay, Signor Aaron,” has he often said

to me, "never did I know what thy mother was till that day, and truly it was the first time I made better acquaintance with thee. Before then I had seen thee still as a mouse, though ever watching, watching with thy tawny eyes so fixed and strained, and often in thy corner with a picture-book. But I am something shamed to tell the story; for rudely did I accost thy mother, an' I were not a fool and licensed in everything. 'Here,' said I, 'is the laughing goddess, and newly out of Vulcan's stithy,' not minding me well that your mother, having had her discreet and Christian bringing up among the heathen revels of my lady's hall,—for, with reverence to my lord, it was he that sat in the bower a-studying the heavens and their star-chamber,—that your mother, Signor

Aaron, knew more about the ancient gods than became a blacksmith's lady in Gospel times. So she first flushed with indignation, and then flamed with fury, till, unable longer to contain herself, she sank upon the marketstone and fell into bitter weeping. Then, like the voice of a full cloud that is big with a fruitful shower, came one great burst, 'Unkind, unthankful! To have eaten our crust, been sheltered warmly by our roof-tree, and then to be out with thy ribaldry at the first temptation.' Then another downpour of tears, the wind of her sighs most piteously wailing. Truly was I abashed and dumb. I had meant nothing but a mad gibe to waken her laughter, since it was ever my way to dart a little invisible sting, with no poison on it, below the skin of those I would enliven. After

which, and while they are all agog, rubbing hard at the place which only smarts for a second or two, I show them such confused sights that they well-nigh think they must be tipsy. Now I lead them where they may see all the snouts of a litter of black swine, thrusting each other out from the corner of a small trough, and anon to a symphony of yellow ducks' bills on a tin pan. Or again, I leap over stiles and a big hound after me. When we are far from the poultry-yard I can crow myself for half a dozen, as you, Master Aaron, remember well. But on that day there was no time to crow or quack, either to you or your good mother. For when you saw that she was weeping you did guess at once that it was I who made her, and there from your vantage-ground on my

shoulder did you begin to pull at my hair and tweak my nose and dig your little heels into my chest, crying out, 'Bad yellow thing! Take me off it. Take me off it.' I put you down at once, and you ran swiftly, with your arms open, to clasp your mother, and did try to pull away her hands from her face. There stood I all the while, like a post that nothing can move. I knew not what to say till your mother rose suddenly, so that you (poor little colt!) were rolled over in the dust. She heeded neither you nor me, but walked straight forward towards the conduit, where she stooped down and rinsed her hands, drying them afterwards on the brown stuff of her dress. Then she came slowly back towards us with her head bowed down, which now and again greatly shook from

side to side as if in sad refusal of some hope offered her. 'Ah, Master Dagonet,' she said, resting the flat of her hands on my shoulders, 'so even you think I am too light-headed for a sober wife. I doubt I am a dancing marshlight, and the furnace will burn clearer when I am quenched.'

"This was the first time I had ever heard her speak in this strain; but afterwards such a shadow of death was often cast over her happy merriment. Never, my lad, to its complete extinction. For often when she excused herself for untimely mirth, it would be with the proviso that 'when she had indeed done with laughing, she would have done with living too.'"

But now it was, according to the Fool's tale, that I did the strangest thing of all.

For seeing Dagonet and my mother in such friendly converse, I did toddle up to them with such a swashbucklering air, as surely no one has ever seen in me since, and hold out my hand to Master Dagonet, saying, "Sweet fool, good fool, most worthy fool." And ever from that day were we closest friends. Never could I quite understand why they called him fool, seeing he made such stout and excellent boots; but addressed him as I heard the others do. Fooling was already on the decline when I was a child, save indeed such bleak and wintry gambols as Archie Armstrong the Scot, by sufferance of two kings, did practise at the expense of Church and bishops. And much of what I tell you is a piecing together of what I have afterwards learnt from the old people who

remember him. That, for instance, which he said himself, about his beginning his pranks with a sharp sting, and going on afterwards with madder waggery to make people merry, is confirmed by every one whom I have heard talk of him. What I call to mind myself is the look of his face after he had nearly made some villager angry. . Master Dagonet's face was rough and russet like an apple, and seamed all over with wrinkles, and a kind of botches, as were the boots he was often mending. His eyes were exceeding sharp ; but his nose was exceeding blunt, and his forehead split into two great knobs. They were no more like the large round temples, which crown the heads of some scholars I have seen, than the wrinkled protuberance on a tree-bole doth resemble a golden orb.

Now after he had launched one of his sharp gibes, and while the person nearly offended was looking hard at him, this knotted face would be slowly screwed up till thrice its usual tale of wrinkles appeared. But out of his bright eyes there came such a light that every hollow and crease of his countenance was filled with sunshine. Such beaming kindness shone forth, that he who had well-nigh answered the Fool angrily was warmed and cheered by it, laughing presently himself, till he was ready to don motley too and away after any game that fancy started.

Even so, as I guess, was Dagonet soon after looking at my mother, till she took heart of grace and told him how sorely she lamented the darkness of her soul, which hindered her good husband from

taking pleasure in the brightness of her face.

“Often must you have seen him, Master Dagonet, when we are all there at supper, look up at something I am saying with a half smile, and his face look open like the day; then must you have seen how his black eyes grow deep again and solemn, his long black hair falls back over his dish, and all is night again. And then—but this you do not so well know, Master Dagonet—then when it is night in real earnest he will call me to him and take my hand, looking on me so tenderly as if it were Jupiter of the flashing thunderbolt looking upon poor Semele.”

“He scorched her up, Mistress Blenkinsop.”

“I know, dearest Fool. So it runs in

the play-books. But I have a lightning-hurler of my own fancy. He was like my husband. He found that Semele had no soul."

"No soul, mistress! And who dares say that of thee, who art the soul of all companies where thou comest?"

"Nay, Dagonet. Master Blenkinsop never *said* I was soulless; but he ever looks at me as if seeking for something, and not finding it he turns wearily away."

"He looks for faults then. Some there be who are mightily disgusted if they find not those little cracks to fill up with the molten lead of their zeal."

"Zeal! Yes, it is zeal that makes him so eager to feel the beatings of those wings, which are furled up under my arms for dread of him. It was not always so."

“No,” quoth the Fool; “when Tim Blenkinsop was the likeliest lad in the countryside, and hurled great weights against the biggest and stoutest, he found that thou hadst a soul then.”

“That did he in very truth,” cried my mother, with a roguish twinkle, as I guess, but sadly still. “If I clapped my hands for delight, with my wide sleeves a-fluttering, and sprang into the air for very eagerness, he always ran to catch me as if he thought I should quit earth for good and all. But now—it boots not grieving. Times are changed and he with them.”

“But he loves thee still, mistress,” said the Fool, wishing to cheer her.

“Oh, he loves me! and I love him. But I cannot brood as he does over the kingdom of God and my meetness for it.

So he sees me ever less and less fair, since the inward beauty in his mind daily increases and he turns not again to vanity."

"But that is no vanity, that blitheness of thine, Mistress Blenkinsop. Can he not feel thou art a blessing to him, and sent by the good God for whose kingdom he longeth?"

"Verily he would fain think so; but seriousness becometh a Christian wife. Ah, poor Tim! he cannot bear to look at those chapters of the blessed Paul's. So far does his own helpmate fall short of them."

"Thereat," said the Fool, "I brought you back to Thorn Abbey, and I expounded to your father the grief of your mother. He listened to me, and from that

time he found a deeper meaning in her mirth. He discovered that she too, though only a woman, and wooed for her merry face when he still delighted chiefly in the pride and gladness of this green earth, was yet stuffed full of wise saws like the great women of old, and able perhaps to save the Israel of God like Deborah and Judith."

Now must I again protest that in speaking of the "Israel of God" my father proved himself no sectary, nor of those who defended kings against themselves, but merely a grave sober man, who saw that many accounted the Church nothing save when she was minded to feed them. Therefore gave he to his words very often that weight of gloom with which the words of old prophets are charged. I hold him

not perfectly in the right to have done so. For surely he thereby added his mite to the prodigality of dark sayings and vehement outcries, with which the bright face of heaven was presently to be clouded and the voice of God's Anointed to be drowned. But I know him to have been honest and of lowly reverent mind, as was also good Master Crape, who lay down resignedly in his grave before the evil times began. Peace to his soul, though he darkened the soul of my father and estranged it from our tender fluttering spirits—my mother's and mine.

It was about a year after the clergyman's death that my mother also breathed her last. The troubles were already beginning; and my mother lay peacefully on the bed she was never to leave when the old lord

settled with my father that I was to go to the Trentwick Grammar School. "I am glad to hear it, lad," said my mother, though she was so weak that we had to listen for each syllable ere it came. "My lord is ever good to those he befriends, not laying on them a weight of thanks and duty while he holds out the loaf to them from a lofty seat. He cheers them and questions them and makes them see how they can be of true service to him." Then she paused, thinking of her childhood in my lord's household. "And so, son Aaron," she cried at last, with such a fire of mischief in her fading eyes, "thou wilt be a learned man and a companion of princes, saying to thyself, when thou standest over my grave, 'There below is the poor earth, out of which I was taken : but for me my

thoughts are in the heavens and swell with all the winds of rumour.'"

I understood her but ill with my six years' intelligence. Yet I knew she meant I should forget her. So, grieved and cut, I ran to the bedside and clasped her hands, crying, "Stay, mother, stay. Why art thou so weak that thou canst walk no longer? What grieves thee? Is it the noise of men and horses, that every one says is in the air?"

"That too," said my mother, shuddering a little at the thought. "That too, my boy. But many things are bearing me away. Thee will my lord's men bear to Trentwick. You know we were over there together? And me will they bear to the churchyard."

"Why there, mother?"

“Master Sexton lives in the church, you know. And I shall live hard by him.”

Then came my lord's chaplain, riding post, to give her the last rites of our Holy Church. They suffered me to stay. And such peace came upon her, as the Bread passed within her lips, that my thoughts were no longer a child's thoughts when I looked on her, since I knew for very fact that she had partaken of eternal life. When all the houselling was done, the chaplain led me again to the bed and I felt her hands on my hair. I cried so that all was darkness before me. The chaplain lifted me and dried my eyes, bidding me look. Her hands had fallen, and I thought of brown birds that I had seen fluttering out their life on the ground. It was in such earthly fancies that she had brought me

up. But her own dear self, no bird or flower, was looking at me out of the loveliest of all eyes—still at last from their dancing, but sweet with all blessing. The light from heaven's sun can never again be quenched in me.

At the instant of her parting I was no longer in the room. They had sent me to sleep in my little loft, into which one climbed by steps on the further side of our livingroom. The chamber of my father and mother ran back over the forge and looked upon the street. I was woken next morning by Dagonet, who slept in a little closet near the bottom of the steps. I knew at once that he was trying to speak to me. But his voice was very thick. He pushed at me three times with "Get up, Aaron." Then as I sat up, back he fell,

jerking one hand out and the other up. Then came out blubberingly a string of syllables, which vainly I endeavoured to fit into words and close in a sentence. But he turned and left me. Dazed and confounded I drew on my clothes, running presently down the steps, to find the room in a disorder like chaos, where sat my father, who was leaning back his head against the chimney-piece. Dagonet was gone to his workshop, a disused office of the inn that was next to us. And so terrible looked my father, his large black eyes so fixed and motionless, that I slipped down into the forge, whence I sallied forth and turned into my friend's shop.

"Wouldst hear her last words?" asked the Fool.

"Yea," I said with a slow gravity. For

of the nature of the terrible thing that had befallen, save that it was in some way to sweep away my blithe, gentle mother, causing her to dwell among the tombstones, like that demoniac in the Evangel, I knew nothing. That I could visit her still on my way to church, or to play with Master Sexton's children, she had herself told me. She had told me earlier so much about her confidences with animals, her flittings about among the dairymaids, the wonderful things she heard in the woods, and the watch she kept upon the ways of men, that surely my prospect of life was something on this wise. I thought, namely, that so soon as by growing older I had broken loose from that little round of tasks, of sports, and of stealing up soon and silently to my bounden rest, I should then join my elfin

mother on her strange errands and strange quests, smiling and getting wiser for ever. And now had that prospect changed, seemingly by her own will and consent. Praised be God that clearly through the dimness of fancy I had seen and known of a surety, in the evening before her death, her true spirit and the seal upon it of everlastingness. But fancy had returned as I cried myself to sleep; and dim was she now indeed, a glowworm in the rank grass of graves.

All the stranger and more moving was the morning's scene. A storm I felt had ravaged our house. And though that door of my mother's room was unopened, and scarce one of my thoughts wandered towards it, my clearest certainty was this, —that she was nowhere near. Nothing

was strong or bright in the house but the dark brilliance of my father's eyes. Loadstones, the friendly Crape had called them. His mighty bereaved soul was urging and impelling me, I knew not whither.

"*Her last words?* Yea," I said to the Fool. "Tell me those."

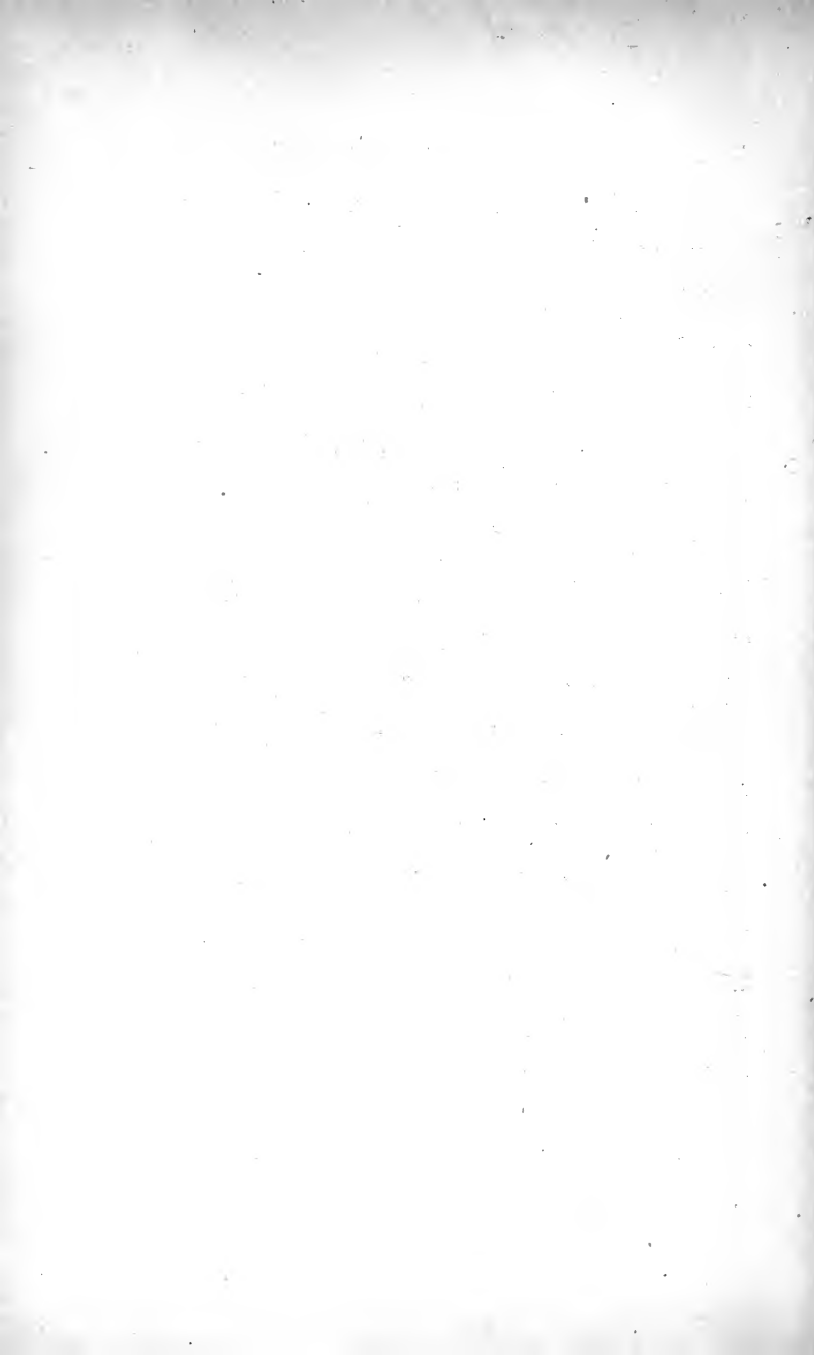
"They were spoken to your father, dear boy. 'I have tried to be a loving wife to thee, Tim. But I doubt thou hast had little comfort latterly from my vain mind. There is that little maiden who is growing up to be a stay to Sim Cotes of the inn hard by. If ever thou longest to give a better mother to my poor little Aaron, bethink thee of Nan Cotes? Demure is she and grave beyond her years, for all that wild beauty of hers.' And presently, my poor little Aaron, your

mother fell asleep until the great waking of all."

This was the most solemn speech that probably Master Dagonet ever uttered. All that morning, and again, indeed, after dinner till evening fell, I sat on in his shop amid the chips of leather that made the place reek like a tanyard. I sat on dreaming and watching what passed on the road, exchanging sometimes a few words with Dagonet, who busily plied his awl. While he shaped the pieces on the last he would slowly wag his head, singing some deep-voiced stave that had in it the roll of drums or the lumbering of wains. And then again, just as he pierced the stuff with a sharp dig, he would out with some ready solution of a quaint enigma. Thus the day passed; and ever after I would

begin my holiday-time with another such day in the sweet company of Dagonet. Sweet I call it : for such love and laughter, with ever so little of the sharp bitter to give them a flavour, were welcomest to me of all things. To others also. For as the years came rolling on, and after men had well-nigh forgotten even that bloody deed at Whitehall in the weariness their own lives suffered from the Commonwealth, there was no more mirth in Thorn Abbey than in the great world outside it. Our rector was a true-bred Presbyterian at last, no trimmer like Master Crape, who held the Gospel anterior to the Confession, but one hard and sour as Master Knox himself. Yet while all the reverend youths went with long faces and took the lashing of the discipline with a sigh of thanks, as

indeed they well might if it would clear them at all from that heinous guilt of regicide which as rebels they had incurred, the older ones sought still for some balm, after the chastening, in the cheerier discourse of Master Dagonet. And even with the stripling zealots he was popular; for, thought they, haply this Fool may yet be converted and prove another Armstrong. Then what means of grace might his quips be, to root out from men's hearts all memory of bishop or curate! But Dagonet was no rude Sawney, to plunder with a jest and wriggle with a flout. He sat on at his trade, sallying forth to mock and be pleasant, till they of Thorn Abbey would on many a day have missed the blessed sunshine less sorely than the shape and presence of their Fool.



CHAPTER II.

Now had twelve years gone since my mother's death. Now was it three years since my father had followed her, having lived to welcome me proudly from Cambridge University and from the Court of France, when I stood one evening on the threshold of Master Dagonet's shop looking on the village street with recollections sad and blithe of all I had ever seen there. Through a gap in the tall hedge I could see our Church, which looked indeed like no church, but showed beams and rafters like

any farm or grange. And indeed, as my mother had said, Master Sexton actually lived in it, so that his children could run about over the parson's head while he preached his grave sermons. The sexton was a brother of Mistress Cotes's, and like her did resemble greatly a damp cloth that had been wrung out. His name was Needham, and his wife had been sister to Mistress Ashton of the farm ; but she was already in her grave when I went for those childish games with the sexton's children. She died in giving birth to her daughter Molly. I had been away for nearly five years, and I wondered much into what kind of a girl Molly Needham had grown up, and whether Jock, her brother, had lost his spirits. Nevertheless I was loth to go and seek them

that evening. For in passing along I must needs behold to my left the great blank window of the Abbey, beneath which Molly and I had sat as children, talking of the great, good, and sorrowing king, and putting up little prayers, our tiny hands clasped together, that he might have victory over all his enemies. True it is that since our country departed, and for most just reasons, from the Roman obedience, these abbey churches have been very ruins, with nave and chancel open to the air and grass growing where was once the altar. But very fitting was the spot to fill two children with warmer devotion to Church and King and the merry England their fathers had known. And upon that spot, now that desecration was everywhere, I could not bear to look.

Pensively musing, I was startled by the sound of hoofs. Now you must know that the street of our village is bent sharply round to the right just beyond Master Cotes's inn, wherein, as I have said, the Fool's workshop was set. On hearing hoofs then I turned in that direction, and there came riding round the corner none other than my young lord himself. He was my lord now, as his father's dust was by this time mingled with that of former Sandiacres in the mother-church of Kirk Holland. The young lord was in gay attire, with a jacket of white satin, hose of red velvet, and high boots of undressed leather ; his garters tied with a blue favour, and an edging of blue under his frilled collar. As he saw me he lifted off his slouched hat, with its ostrich feather, that,

waving in the sunlight, showed crimson tints along the quill; and his golden love-locks streamed in the wind. His horse was lightly and strongly built, of a dappled gray, like smoke against a white cliff. I was presently holding it, and kissing my lord's hand in token of service; which well I might do, seeing that my lord had ridden the fifteen miles from his Hall for nothing but to see his poor secretary. While I was doing him this homage, who should run out from the inn but Nancy Cotes, the girl whom my mother had chosen to succeed her, had my father been so minded, which he never was? Often, indeed, on my visits and holidays had I seen her sitting with my father—she asking questions about the way of saints, and he endeavouring to satisfy her thereon.

But it was ever as a daughter that he treated her; and so rapidly did Master Blenkinsop age, his grizzled locks getting whiter and whiter, that she never regarded him as other than a father. Her own father, good man, understood ale better than religion, and her mother's yearnings after the Path were as wavering as her footsteps that should walk in it.

If you will remember rightly, Mistress Nan was now some seven and twenty years of age. "What's your will?" she asked of my lord, with just a quiver of sauciness about her fine nostrils.

"A flagon of Burgundy from mine host's cellar, to say nothing of your own fair hands, Mistress Nan."

"The silver one, Nancy," added the little upstart who was standing by, divided

between loyalty to his master and pride in his village.

“No need to tell me that, brother Aaron,” was her quick reply; and away she ran again, the house ringing with her laughter.

“Why, Blenkinsop,” asked my lord, “doth that fair wench dress herself so slovenly now? She was not used to, while the bloom of her teens was still about her, and why now, when—but, my God, how lovely she is!”

Now you will remember, I think, that when Nan was quitting her teens my lord was still two years from entering them. But that is the way with boys, who think ever to hold their heads higher by speaking familiarly of mature women.

“Is it,” continued my lord, who was too deep in conversation to think of dismount-

ing. "Is it the infection of those accursed principles by which we are now governed, that causeth a disregard of comeliness and order?"

"Nay, not quite, my lord," I answered—not able wholly to forbear a smile to hear my young master taking up so suddenly with the grave tone of deep policies, who in France had done little else but play at tennis and dally with the Queen's damsels—"for, indeed, my lord, though I hate all the principles of the sectaries, yet I must needs say that a great part of them attire themselves with care and neatness, though soberly and with simplicity. It is but the wilder Antinomian sects, men great in the Book of Daniel and the privileges of the poor, who affect a raggedness and wildness in their aspect."

"Then is Mistress Nancy of the Fifth Monarchy persuasion?" asked my lord, laughing.

"Nay, who can tell what she is?" I cried in some bewilderment, and wishing indeed to lead away the discourse from this girl, who was a kind of elder sister to me by my father's homiletic adoption of her. "Who can tell? I think she is like a pent whirlwind."

Out she rushed again, that beautiful whirlwind. But her streamers flew less wildly. She had set straight around her shoulders the white linen handkerchief that, before she went in, was lying loose on her blue corset. She had fastened tightly her red bodice and looped up her lemon-coloured skirt. Only her hair still straggled loosely, and the high sunburnt

hues of her face, with its fine, bold features and flashing eyes of deep hazel, gave her that restlessness of rich, ripe beauty, which no gravity can tame.

“Wait a moment, my lord. The cask was long in finding and will be a minute or two in broaching. So, pardon me,” and she was about to withdraw again.

But at that moment Master Dagonet appeared on his threshold, and seeing my lord, came up to him and solemnly kissed his hand.

“What, Dagonet!” exclaimed my lord, “the mad jester, whose expulsion from my father’s Hall, before my infant feet trod them, I have ever considered as one of the plagues of my nativity.”

“The same, my lord,” quoth Dagonet, “but the plague surely was like those of

Egypt, and preceded a happy deliverance.”
The jester bowed as he said it.

“Whether, Sir Dagonet, my mother had the happier deliverance of me, or of thee, who wert ever a thorn in her side, she in her venerable estate of Dowager would shrink from telling me.”

“Nay, my lord, save for her scant admiration of study and plentiful study of admiration, she was venerable to me even in her youth. But a loyal heart and a sharp tongue shall together bring a man into sore straits.”

“Her son forgives thee all, most loyal jester,” quoth my lord.

“Ay, ay,” said the Fool. “But here is pretty Nancy run away from us again. Sadly she mourns thy father, friend Aaron. For truly the mill that beats in my brain

cannot grind the finer meal of controversy for her. And I am too old for repairs in that quarter."

Dagonet always spoke of himself as old at that time. But in truth he had only been thirty when he settled at Thorn Abbey, and was consequently not more than five and forty at present.

After a brief delay Nan Cotes appeared again in the door, holding up a flagon of old silver, whereon was embossed the story of Cupid and Psyche. It had been a present from Sandy Hall to the *George* when Sim Cotes was married to Patty Needham. My lord backed his horse, so that stooping down he could drink out of the flagon that Nancy held.

"Aha!" cried Dagonet, "now am I inspired. Now do I see things again

allegorically. You behold Beauty that holdeth up to Youth her cup of enchantment. Give me the flagon, Mistress Nancy. By m' life how sweetly bulbeth out the figure of Psyche as she looks into the lamp. Look not into the cup, sweet Nan, to see the kisses which my young Lord Cupid has left there."

My lord's mouth had indeed that full fine shape which is called the Bow of Cupid, and he was beaked like an eagle, his cheeks being round and fresh and the light ever dancing in his blue eyes. And when he lifted his hat again, the ringlets of gold flew all about his face, so that he was veritably an image of that god who wounds the hearts of maidens. I glanced round at Nancy, in some fear for the girl. She seemed half to sink as she took the

flagon from Dagonet with her left hand, looking up shyly at my lord, and yet the flash in her eyes was well-nigh fierce with eagerness. She had those curved nostrils which we see in statues of Minerva, and they throbbed now between embarrassment and admiration. When my lord had dismounted she strode up and threw one arm over his horse's neck, looking at us all with a kind of reckless defiance.

"Shall I call our ostler," she asked, "to loose Dapple's girths, and rest him a little in our stables? Or will the slender high-mettled beast disdain the company of post-horses?" A strange kind of pride appeared to be surging within her.

"Nay, Mistress Nan," answered my lord; "neither Dapple nor his master disdains the society of old friends. For

the Cotes's were good friends to the Stantons time out of mind."

The Stantons had been Lords of Sandi-acre for some three hundred years.

"But in truth," continued my lord, "I have but time to visit my worthy Blenkinsop and gracious Master Dagonet in their lodging above the old forge. So a feed of corn for my horse, and a stoup of wine for us three, is all I shall now ask at your hands. Will you send it in to us next door?"

"Good, my lord," answered Nancy, and after a low curtesy she turned from us and moved slowly into the house.

"Dagonet," said my lord, when we were all three seated round the table at which my mother had so often worked, "you called me Lord Cupid a while ago. And

truly I would do the office of that winged god in wounding the heart of fair Mistress Nan with a sweet pain for none other than thine honest self, most gallant jester."

"A Fool with grey hairs marry a travellers' Hebe, the cynosure of eyes youthful and gallant, quench the wild glances that flash radiance into brains nigh darkened with drink. Heaven forbid that poor Dagonet should decline into the vale of years with the burden of such a crowning folly."

"Years," quoth my lord. "It is but fifteen at most since we were boys together. If my lady mother will but pardon you, I will take you to be my steward in room of the canting knave who fills that office now. Often I know didst thou cast accounts with Aaron's grandfather, peace

to his ashes! Thy wife shall rule the maids; and my mother be eased of her cares. Since youth and its revels were over with her, she has practised devotion, and inclineth to the straiter sects. Let her mind be free for such heavenly exercises, instead of compounding godliness and thrift into such precepts as make me afraid to speak to any of my own household."

"But Mistress Nan," said I, "is likewise precisian."

"A whim merely, that loyalty to her mirthful spouse shall cure her of."

So spake my lord with a boy's generous warmth. But whether there was not, as a deep current determining the course of his fickle mind, some thought of that hellish and ignoble wickedness that induces certain lords to furnish some steward or

chaplain with a fair wife, I cannot now pronounce. Meditating much on what is said by the divine Plato about the corruption of noble natures, I incline to think his soul was at this time quite free from baser sediment, and that only on his last expedition to the French Court did he pick up those habits of riot and intrigue which now distress his friends. Yet watching him from day to day I cannot tell you when the change began, though I can very surely tell you that it is not so complete as to have killed in him all faith and kindness towards his servants.

“Nay but, Dagonet,” he continued, “thou hast but sorry quarters in this house, where that squat new blacksmith, with his stubbly red hair, must howl thee well-nigh out of thy wits with his hymns,

while he refuses to part with any of his own in a friendly glass. What a churl to deny us his company."

"No churl, I think, to spare your lordship his churl's company," said the jester.

"And the knave was busy, I suppose," added my lord in accents of forgiving candour. "But thou shalt not refuse me, Master Dagonet. We will send for the wench at once."

My lord's brains, being tender and young, were likewise "poor and unhappy," as the poet says, "for drinking." And he was by this time a little flushed and flighty.

The Fool was for a time silent. Then he did what greatly surprised me. For with an air of much gravity he slowly rose, and laying his hand on my lord's shoulder

he said, "Thy green wits, young master, are a little wandering, or I should be deeply offended that thou shouldst talk of sending for her who is to be my wife, as if she were some light damsel, to make us merry at our drinking."

"Thy wife! It is all I ask," said my lord, with just the ghost of a hiccough.

We put him to sleep on a load of blankets that by chance stood near the steps into my old loft. Not that he was badly overtaken. But we could not suffer him to ride forth in our village with ever so little of a wild look. Presently we heard some one mounting from the forge, and with a hood over her forehead there stood in the door none other than Mistress Nan herself. She threw back the hood, and with an inquiring laugh asked us where

Lord Sandiacre had been disposed of. She had come to tell him that his horse was ready. We pointed her out where my lord now lay, sleeping like a most innocent child. Looking down at him, she sighed deeply and turned to us with a "Sure he is weary with his ride." But we, promising to escort him down almost immediately, made as if we wished her gone. Seeing which she exclaimed, "Vain wench that I am! That I should be so eager to dally with that spruce lad. Hold me not light, Master Dagonet."

"So far from holding thee light," Mistress Nan," said the Fool, taking her by the hand and leading her to the stairhead, "thou shalt see what thou shalt see." And placing his arm round

her he supported her down into the forge, as though she had been ailing or a cripple.

I woke my lord not long after, and told him that he would find cold water if he took the trouble to mount into my loft. I watched him rise with a slight stagger and spring up the steps, though he held his hands to the rail when he had ascended. He vanished, and returned presently with his face still dripping. He wore a sullen look, and snatching up a napkin that lay on the table he buried his face in it for a minute or two and then threw it away. He looked round to see if any of his gear lay about, and moved towards the stairs with one furtive glance at his humble secretary. He could feel that I was displeased and had no desire to confer on the

matters for which he had come, relating as they did to some journey he was presently to take. I caught up a cloak which had been fastened to his saddle, whence he had loosed it out of mere wanton heedlessness, and throwing it over my arm I followed him in respectful silence.

When we had got down into the forge we saw no sign of the red-haired blacksmith, my father's successor. He had interrupted his labours, and gone very like into the alehouse. It was quite dusk now, and we could scarcely grope our way among the stools and iron bars. My lord stood for a moment undecided, and complained of the cold. I handed him the cloak and he drew it slowly over his shoulders. Suddenly the furnace, which had been covered, was set free with the rattling of a sheet of

iron, and looking round we saw in its blaze the upper half of two figures. To the right were the head and shoulders of Dagonet, who had seated himself on the anvil. His head was bent down to another upturned head, which had that fiery glow of devout rapture that I have seen sometimes at Venice in pictures of St. Mary Magdalene. We could see that he had his left arm cast about her shoulders, and could hear that he was swinging his legs and talking to her eagerly and cheerfully. With his right hand he had dashed the fire free, that my lord might come thither for warmth if he chose. But as we approached we saw that he was now resting that right hand upon Nan's dark brown hair and was murmuring over her some fond blessing. As for her, we could see that she was

seated upon a low stool and leaning her elbows upon his knees.

My lord stood by the furnace, very still, with his heavy cloak drooping to the ground. He hemmed out a faint approval, and then said to Dagonet very quietly, "I will sound my lady-mother about thy living with us as steward. Fare ye well, friends." He cleared his way quickly between the lumber of the forge, and his stately cloaked figure reared itself once proudly on the threshold, black against the red glow, and waving a hand that he had freed with a rapid movement, he was lost to us in the blackness of a shadow.

Thereupon I looked round at Nan, and saw that the back of her head was resting on her left forearm, and that that was

still laid upon Dagonet's knees. The glow of the furnace was on her face, and I could see that the sight of her eyes had gone forth as it were into that blackness wherein my lord's form had been lost. Presently her eyes closed and her lips gently parted. I bent down and saw that there was a strained stillness over all her features, as though she had gone into a trance. As for Dagonet, he had folded his arms and was trying, though in sore discomfort, not to move lest he should harm Nancy by a sudden awakening. At this moment the squat new blacksmith appeared on the threshold, and seeing his fire uncovered, and a parcel of drunken vagabonds, as he thought, warming themselves in its blaze, he shouted rudely, so that we all started up, Dagonet slipping

off his sharp-cornered seat, and I watching to catch Nancy if haply she might fall with affright. I had no occasion indeed ; but as we were passing out with curt apologies to the blacksmith, she felt a faintness, and leaning suddenly on my shoulder said in a pitiful voice, " You will always befriend me, will you not, brother Aaron ? "

Whereupon that churl—Moggs was the creature's name—I cannot think of him without sickness—took Dagonet by the sleeve and whispered with a sanctified leer, " Fine screens of Satan are those names of brother and sister for the sinful dalliance of such as these. Art not ashamed, thou hoary-headed buffoon, to sit like Sir Pandarus——"

But before another word was out,

Master Dagonet had felled him to the ground with his clenched left hand, mauling him over that lying mouth and causing streams of crimson to mingle with the dirty vermilion of his beard. When we were clear of the forge it seemed to us that the furnace was burning smokily, like a hell-mouth cheated of its sinners. As for the muddy devil, we left him mangled and forlorn, and I for my part never saw his vile carcase pieced together again. But I cannot help thinking his spiteful slander did contribute somewhat to that fall from general favour of poor Dagonet, which I have soon to relate. We slept both of us at the *George* that night, and Dagonet sent the ostler for his things, bidding him bear also some salves and ointments for the bruises he had so righte-

ously inflicted. So far was Dagonet from being a man of violence. As for Nan, she stole into a little parlour of her mother's, sending once for Master Dagonet, that she and he might receive Mistress Cotes's blessing.

It was first arranged that Dagonet and Nancy were to be married in my lord's own chapel. But when that plan of the stewardship fell through, by reason of my Lady Dowager's dislike of it, every one thought it better that the office should be performed in the Church of Kirk Holland, which was brought about by stealth in the early morning. For the sexton of Kirk Holland was one who, though serving the Presbyterian "gowned vulture"—a term better used of that interloping sort than of learned and civil lawyers—did in truth

mourn bitterly the liturgies and orders which had been so despitefully trampled on. So he arranged to unlock the church at five in the morning, and to admit first of all my lord's chaplain, who was to have on a rough ploughman's frock, the ends of his cassock being tucked up under it. It was to look indeed as if he were some lout, whom the sexton should have hired to help him in pew and pulpit cleaning. Then the rest of the party, to wit Dagonet and Nancy and myself, were to saunter through the lych gate, as though we had come over hill and dale for the freshness of the summer morning.

My lord was to stay away, not indeed that he feared a tussle with some crop-eared constable, but that he would not bring Nan or Dagonet into suspicion of

“malignancy”—the rebels’ nickname for the evangelical virtues. But I think also that he kept away from a kind of shame. Dagonet had accused him of treating Nan lightly, though certainly that was before they were indeed plighted to one another. And in any case his brain had been somewhat confused when he had last seen them together. So that in fact there was no one but little Aaron to accompany that strange couple to the altar, or rather, since the form of marriage was observed even in that hugger-mugger ceremony, Dagonet and his friend Aaron waited at the altar, and the chaplain came out from the sacristy leading the bride by the hand. When all was over we returned to the inn for breakfast; and Master Cotes was unusually sober and his wife unusually

cheerful. Molly Needham and her brother Jock came in soon afterwards. Molly told us that her uncle, Master Ashton, the farmer, wished Dagonet and Nan to have the cottage which stood nearest to the Abbey, and which he had rented from my lord, having once had other views in regard to it—"views," said Molly, with a deep blush, "that affected herself, but must now be altogether and for ever renounced." "For ever," she repeated, looking at me hard and piteously. Whereupon I caught both her hands and urged her to come with me into the shelter of the window. Molly's hands were large and red, from household work for her father and milk-maid's work for her uncle. But her face was as delicate and slender and pale as any I have ever seen. A light rose-tint

often played upon her cheek, and hair of a dusky gold hung in tassels about her forehead. It is sufficient to say that farmer Ashton had intended the cottage for Molly, since he was sure for his part of two things :—first, that Molly and I would certainly be married ; and secondly, that I should soon tire of that book-worm and lacquey life, as he called it, and be ready and willing to succeed him at the farm. As for Jock, he was sorely hated by his aunt, either because she was envious, having no son or other child of her own, or else on account of the mischievous tricks he played upon her as a child to the frightening of her careful mind. So, despairing of his uncle's taking him to help in the farm, he had been bound apprentice to a locksmith in Trentwick. He was

tall and stooping, though very strong, having straight black hair and a red face. His master was exceedingly indulgent, and allowed him often to visit his father and sister. To-day he was in high spirits, and when Molly and I were standing in the window he called out merrily to us, so that we started and blushed in a way that made him merrier still. But it was all up for the day. I had begun to tell her about my plan of life, and how I hoped, if the good times came again, for a place in London under Government, through my lord's favour, and I had said much about her excellent schooling, and how never a lady in the land could be fuller of grace and discretion, she pouting the while and looking down straight at a tambour-frame that lay upon a little stool,

when out came Jock's laugh, and there was no more talk between us for an age. Save only that I said she should assuredly have news of me abroad, and whispered to her that I was trusty and steadfast—never should I be false to my king or to her.

It was the very next morning that I once more quitted Thorn Abbey. A post-horse was brought out for me, and Dagonet stood patting it, while a strange moisture stole into his eyes. He had been moody during the latter part of the previous day, and Nancy, blooming and blushing as became a bride, had striven hard to cheer him. But she herself had a kind of terror on her. Especially as she looked at me did her brown eyes wander uneasily, as though there was something to be recollected.

which haply, if I could tell her, she would express great sorrow for. Woe, I say, unto the prophets of woe! Woe unto those who are ever urging on the poor soul to probe into its sores and its sins, as if a mere thought of evil should float for ever like a cloud before the Mercy Seat. This was Nan's ailment, though I knew it not at the time. My father, poor man, had spoken chiefly of his own sins, which were, he said, pride, envy, uncharitableness, and a mind often darkened with a stubborn carnality. Notwithstanding which, he was very sure that he, for his part, had constant glimpses of the one and only Light. She confessed to him that she could not feel always that she had found it; but after she had talked for long he would always end by telling her

that assuredly it was shining in her heart, however dimly, and the one thing she need be careful about was to preserve always that gravity and seriousness of which she had given such early proof. This she had continued to do ; and it was well with her. Never did traveller or young neighbour venture on light treatment of her, though she was ever cheerful in her serving, and was soberly pleased at the warm admiration she drew. But for the last few years she had thrown off, not gravity indeed, but that quietness of demeanour she had formerly observed. Of the causes and issue of that change I must presently speak.

My last sight of her on this occasion was cheering. Seeing that Dagonet wept, she threw her arm over his shoulder, and bringing his face round to hers they both

fell a-smiling together. A sweet and happy pair! But other signs were more ominous. Mother Ashton had come down the street to see the last of me: her husband and Master Needham came after her, arm-in-arm—the broad, jolly farmer, with a laughing mouth, a puzzled brow, and warning eyes, the sexton looking very timid and very wise. Both ended, however, by patting me affectionately on the back. Sim Cotes, who had got very drunk in the course of the evening, was scarce awake, and his wife stood with a Bible under her arm, pale and scared, while her lips closed, opened, and trembled, as though she were debating what she should do in some difficult matter. I turned quickly, and saw that she was looking at her daughter. Mother Ashton, who had never liked the

match from the first, surveyed them with scorn and spite, her brawny elbows sticking out from her tall and monstrous figure. The sexton gave me a hasty glance and skipped away, the farmer rolling after him.

But off I rode now, troubling my head little with the meaning of all this. It was explained to me long afterwards that Moggs, whose ugly face, covered with plaister, had been peering round the doorpost of his forge, was the true cause of this and all following troubles. While honest Sim had been getting deeper and deeper into beer on the previous evening, that snuffling dung-devil had crept into the mother's parlour, and, without daring indeed to repeat his slander against me, had said all the evil he could invent about his

just corrector, Dagonet. He spoke of fools as a race that were ever taxing all just civic authority, while they flattered the wantonness of young lords and old wealthy disards ; that they were lost to all shame, coining their smiles and mirthful antics to the defacement of God's image and man's worth. All which of certain mimes I will allow to be true. But what of those who aped godliness and counterfeited sorrow, the better to nurse that hell-born changeling, their envious malice—a wicked sprite, that fleshes his teeth in the infancy of every love, human or divine, gnawing away state and dignity and gladness, those jewels of God that glitter on the face of His world ? I had rather be an uncertain bubble from the Limbo of Vanities, whose dancing brightness may some-

times lure Justice to peep from under her bandage, than such a low-browed drudge, as would depress the plumage of Iris under the weight of Triptolemus' clods.

But such was not the mind of Mistress Cotes. She feared that the motley livery of Master Dagonet's wit was worn but as a specious cover for some burning shame or red-handed malignancy. She repented her that she had allowed the match, and said angrily to her daughter, "A fine match thou hast made after all thy waiting! The very manner of thy wedding was flat rebellion! And couldst thou not perceive, during those weeks of courting, that Master Dagonet's heart was not right towards thee? No true man's wooing was his! Did he ever tell thee that he yearned for thy love, or that he would work twice as

hard at his trade to support thee? All which things a Christian and godly lad would have said! No, truly—it was to oblige his lord. And I only pray he may not oblige him, as I have lately heard such menials do, to thine own dishonour and undoing!”

“Dagonet!” cried Nan, with a flash of proud affection, “Dagonet prove base in one jot or tittle? He is my only friend and protector—my only lover, my only guide! It is I, poor light-brained girl, who have stood nearer to that gulf of sin and vanity than any one thinks of!”

“Ah! at thine old confessions again! Did not Master Blenkinsop, of blessed memory, tell thee often to take heed to thy steps, and leave thy heart to the Lord? But now thou hast marred and vexed it

for long years, in restless idleness, and at last given it away to a fool !”

The mother was chafed, and had not understood her daughter's words. Else had even that simple mother found some comfort in her wallet, and Dagonet been saved his long trouble.

It was close upon three years ere I again returned to England from a sojourn among the German courts. By that time I had made the acquaintance of many Dutch scholars, and had exercised my ingenuity in controversies with them upon points of the civil law and the maxims or manners of the ancient Romans. It was a time when honest physicians did but get wearied of experiment upon the body politick. As an English exile of some learning—exile, I say, for neither my lord

nor I would take service under the Government—and as a vagabond without cares of State, I would direct my attention to those features of private life, and those quibbles of the forum, which have always especially delighted the contemplative philosopher. I loved not only the biting pasquils of Juvenal, but those innumerable epigrams of Martial, wherein, it has always seemed to me, the Muse doth beguile her imperial servitude with the jingling of her small and heavy, her countless and sparkling fetters. While my lord sped the time merrily, and plotted gaily with the well-affected for that happy and loyal consummation which we now enjoy, the tremulous, bushy-haired Blenkinsop sat on at his book, jotting down from time to time a little Latin epigram on the people or

events of the Courts where we were staying. At last a little collection of them was published at Leyden, and before long I was regarded in some restricted circles as a man both famous and formidable. As it came to pass, a French nobleman, who had spent much time in Holland, was staying at Sandy Hall when my lord and I returned to it. On hearing who it was that accompanied Lord Sandiacre, this nobleman exclaimed to the Lady Dowager, "Hey, hey! the ingenious and celebrated Monsieur Aaron! I have always longed to meet him!"

The longing was not returned. Much had I heard of this noble gentleman at the Hague, Utrecht, and elsewhere. He had been reared on the memories of St. Bartholomew, and told that he must pray

ever for the alighting of that vengeful Hand, which he could see brandished out of heaven—told also that he himself might be the victim. Hence he had grown up with a bitter heart and a bewildered brain, living in a kind of swinish or cynick negligence. He had thrown up study in despair, and pursued many furtive and mean amusements, delighting in cruelty and sottishness, threatening to exact his signorial rights, and then holding forth to pastors and presbyters on the carnal and savage tyranny of those other lords who were not Huguenots. The mere sight of his blobbery and brutish face was a terror to the peasant girls who were soon to be brides. He knew it, the ferocious hog, and was glad that he could scatter broadcast the steam and splash of his wallow-

ing. Suddenly this devout earthworm had a fancy to travel, and at sight of some simple-minded and bright-witted scholars he bethought him of turning Mæcenas. He ever greeted them at first with a weak and wintry smile, which seemed to them admiration of their gifts. Then would he grow exceeding pompous, and talk a great quantity of silly stuff, which he desired the scholars to take notice of. Most of them felt entangled, as if their wisdom could indeed be nothing but folly, seeing that mad and rambling prophecies came as trippingly from the tongue as any polished and argute dissertation of their own. Soon were they brought to promise him dedications and panegyrics, and with these a few of them escaped. But others continued to go daily to the nobleman's

lodgings, where they ate sparingly of his sordid fare and bound over their wits to the service of his envious and railing cranks. It was this serpents' nest of rhyming philosophasters that first urged me to the composition of that above-mentioned tract about ancient buffoonery. With some strokes, I flatter myself, of sound learning and much remembrance of that kindly jester, Dagonet, the very sponsor of my spirit, I dulled many of their viperous heads and maimed the following of Duke Diogenes.

Meantime, my lord's mother was much impressed with the duke's distinguishing favour to me. She appeared also to conceive for me a great affection, called me often into her cabinet, and abstained always from reminding me that I was the

offspring of a neighbouring blacksmith, and the grandson of her old steward. The morning after my arrival was the first occasion on which she sent for me. I found her seated at her table and turning over some papers and ledgers; a large piece of unfinished embroidery hung over a music desk; a broken guitar lay near it. There was a great confusion about the room; but one corner of it was clear and neat, having in the centre of its space a tall and rusty brass lectern, which had come into the family from the spoils of the Abbey Church. Supported on this was a thick, heavy Bible, bound in black, with silver clasps. In front of it was a low settle, with wide wooden-barred wings on either side, and at the right hand of this, a table with many folios of Puritan divines in

brown leather, while there stood open on a rest the "Bethshemesh" of Master John Rogers. The same wild fancies and love of authority which had distinguished my lady's youth did now lend their colour to the devotions of her age. She was dressed in black velvet, and the waxen pallor of her complexion was set off with coral earrings of a dull blush-rose hue. Her small black eyes were bright, but unsteady.

"And so, my good Blenkinsop," she said to me, "you have gained yourself renown by learning, and have not neglected your duties to my son. The French nobleman, a godly and devout man, telleth me of a ward of his, that liveth in his house at Utrecht, whom he would gladly see thee wed. The old families, he opineth, whose power hath been so much

broken by that wicked and famous Cardinal, should recruit themselves with men of wit and discernment. And you, my young friend, would do better to bind thy Pegasus to the chariot of the avenging saints, more particularly when he that driveth is of ancient blood, than to let the noble steed run riot in the pastures of prelacy or popery, and yourself drink of the cup of shame in some godless tavern with mimes and minstrels and buffoons!"

So she spake. But I, thinking all the while of Molly Needham, said cunningly, that doubtless the duke would shrink at the last moment from giving his ward to a mechanic's son, though in my heart I suspected that the girl must be some bastard of his own that he would fain be

rid of, and that meanwhile my duty was at Sandy with her son.

“And that is very true,” said she. For by this time she was somewhat afraid of her son. “But I doubt you will find much changed in that village of Thorn Abbey, where you were born. Most signally have my ill-bodings about that wicked Dagonet been fulfilled. His cruelty and vanity and neglect have brought Mistress Nancy, that sweet vessel of the Lord, to sorrow and shame and weeping.”

“She weepeth haply for her mother’s death,” said this humble writer, who had lately heard the news.

“Her mother is in heaven, and harping with the angels upon golden psalteries,” said my lady, casting up her eyes; “and her husband and her father are drinking

and jesting from morning to night. Hardly will Dagonet finish a piece of cobbling in a fortnight. And the cause of Nancy's sorrow must be deep as hell. She looketh like one who hath glanced into Satan's own kingdom, and knoweth from daily sight and hearing the horror and venom of a black and corrupt heart!"

"But Dagonet," I exclaimed, "surely he must at least pity her forlorn estate. I never knew him to look upon the smallest misery, and not to essay thereat some word of comfort!"

"Glozing virtues," said my lady, "and worldly charities. He would fain be popular, and smiled and wept like a simple changeling. He insulted ever against gravity and stern rectitude." My lady forgot what a wanton and gadding world-

ling she had been when the jester taxed her with pride. "But now," she continued, "he is cured of popularity. All the village hoots upon him. Master Needham will not speak with his brother-in-law, for that he still countenances the fool. And farmer Ashton hath ere this driven him from the church-fields with a horsewhip."

"And what of Moggs, the blacksmith?" I inquired. "Doth he also frown upon mine old acquaintance, Dagonet?"

"Alas!" said my lady, "Master Moggs received the martyr's crown a year ago in the marketplace of Trentwick, where he had been preaching that greater liberty of inward Christianity, which taketh but little account of outward acts — a doctrine to which, though not always without peril, my lord duke doth also incline."

I found afterwards that Moggs had died under a shower of brickbats, for not only preaching, but endeavouring to practise that swinish license allowed of by Lodowick Muggleton. Like the thick-snouted fiend in Albert Dürer's representation of the "Knight and Death," Master Moggs had snorted dark terrors and cast greedy glances at the wives and daughters of several honest citizens, who speedily invoked on the false prophet that wrath of the multitude which, the Ranters tell us themselves, is the wrath of God. And he perished. The French duke perished also after a few years, and in a like sin. The manner of his death was more signal still. He had married the Dowager Lady Sandiacre and brought her to live at Namur, near the Duchy of Luxembourg.

He had quitted the post of patron, having given his ward, or natural daughter, to a drunken Dutch poet, who beat her daily, and been much upbraided by his new wife for such cruel carelessness, and in terms not quite so plain for an old sin, which she more than half suspected. On the passing of the Edict of Toleration he was summoned to appear at Court, but hating to be tolerated he left the Court suddenly and conformed to the Romish religion. His wife remained steadfast to her Genevan creed, but went sometimes to mass, so that none might suspect her of heresy. There came suddenly into the duke's head that strange and impious ambition, which is treated of in a sacred Spanish drama—that they perform only upon the most solemn occasions, and as an act of faith.

He desired namely, to win to his pleasure a bride of heaven, a dedicated vestal, so that God might suddenly smite him out of the clouds, their long feud be ended, and he himself in the eternal dungeons. So he contrived with an evil-minded priest the following device: A proclamation was issued to a certain convent that if one of the sisters would walk by night through a part of the forest-land of Ardennes to a shrine of the Virgin, she should bring an especial blessing on the House.

All which was strangely brought to pass. The duke waited, alone and unattended, near the edge of a cliff, where the sister was to pass in her pilgrimage. Now, at her first passing on her outward journey, a kind of awe seized the duke's mind and he let her be. Sister Bridget, the youngest

and fairest of the nuns, had been the one chosen. And when she reached St. Mary's shrine she knelt to perform her devotions, and her knee grated against something hard. This she found to be a woodman's axe, that had been left lying across the front of the little tabernacle. She took it as a gift from the Holy Mother, seeing that mortal dangers were sometimes to be averted by mortal means. She was holding it under her robe when she again passed the cliff. The moon was shining with a wintry glare, and the horrid, uncouth face and jagged teeth of the duke came grimly into her view. His hands clutched her shoulder, when suddenly a scamper was heard beneath them, and the duke's shins were gashed and gored by another wild hog that had issued from the copsewood.

The duke reeled and fell near the edge of the cliff. The boar sent his tusks into the fallen wretch's sides, so as to set him rolling with pain and terror over the edge of the cliff. The animal stooped down a little, and would doubtless have rushed upon the nun. But she with her axe fetched him a blow above the eye, so that he died, and then, leaving the axe by the carcase, returned again to her convent.

Some woodmen who were working next morning near the bottom of the white cliff found the body of the duke, and ascending a pathway came presently upon the dead boar and the axe. The axe, as it chanced, belonged to one of these woodmen, who had left it before the Virgin's shrine that a blessing might follow upon his autumn's cutting. He had been working at brush-

wood with a knife, and had not yet gone to fetch away the axe. But now, recognising it, he bethought him that some miraculous vengeance had occurred. Surely this wicked duke, who was ever a heretic and a libertine at heart, had intended deliberate insult to Our Lady, and had gone a-hunting with a dedicated axe. He brought word of this to the Convent of Namur. Thereupon the Superior, a trifle worldly and timid, was much perplexed, and sent instantly for Sister Bridget. She, as one inspired and fearless, told all that had happened. But the Superior, who thought that account would some day be required of the House for so great a nobleman's death, said that undoubtedly the nun, at once presumptuous and silly, had come upon the duke, who, according to the

manner of the country, had gone out by moonlight to hunt the boar, and mistaking some simple address of his for a wicked attempt had scared him over the precipice. She herself confessed to having taken the axe, which was both theft and sacrilege.

The duke's widow was the next person consulted. She, to the surprise of all, credited Sister Bridget's story, forbade any proceedings or investigation, and came over to the convent herself.

"I know well," she said to the trembling nun, "what my husband's principles were." She had found out what the Christian liberty of some sectaries included. "I can believe that he did as you say. And now, seeing that she you worship as God's mother hath most plainly intervened, I

shall renounce my heresies and ask presently for admission to your Order."

This admission was granted her, and after a time she became Superior of the convent. And when her son and I visited her, many years afterwards, we found her more peaceable and cheerful and humble than we had ever known her, and probably than she had ever been since the early days of her marriage with Lord Sandiacre. So vanish all these busy and zealous ones from my story, and I am back again in my village and charged with my lord's greetings to Dagonet.

CHAPTER III.

ARRIVED in Thorn Abbey, I went first to the forge, where, as I had learned from my lady, Jock Needham was now established. He did all his smith's work with great diligence and dexterity, and being sought to by those of neighbouring villages was now in a fair way to be prosperous. He had grown very shy and stern and silent. He answered in very few words my questions about Nan and Dagonet. They were living in the cottage near the Abbey, had one little baby-son,

and were not so well-to-do as they had been. Farmer Ashton, though he never would speak to Dagonet—that about his driving him with a horsewhip was only a fable—yet excused them their rent. That was all he would say. But presently his sister Molly came in to bring him some food, and on seeing me was much startled, but came up in a flutter to kiss me. Then she sat down on a stool, and turning round to her brother said quickly, “Have you told him?”

“Told what?” asked her brother as quickly, and with some temper.

“Why! the wicked and unjust blame that every one throws on Dagonet, and the strange misery of poor Nan.”

“Nay,” said Jock; “I never say what I can’t know. If a jester grows sullen,

a cobbler lazy, and the jester-cobbler's wife goes about as if she trembled for her life, who can fancy that all is right with them?"

"It is a puzzle, I freely grant. But it is no one's business save their own."

"Is Dagonet grown a drunkard?" I asked sadly.

"That is he not!" cried Molly. "And Master Cotes is grown almost sober since Dagonet and he, shunned by most of their neighbours, have taken to spending the half of every day in each other's company."

"And of what think you that they talk?" I inquired.

"I, for my part," said Molly, with a shy little tremble in her voice, "think that they talk mostly of Nan, and wonder what secret cares are tormenting her."

"Bold little witch!" said her brother;

“neither of us knoweth the inside of the *George* nor of Dagonet’s cottage. It is all guess-work. Perchance they are as merry as you or I.”

“Then a double shame is it,” said Molly, “for the village to be so slanderous, and to hate the merry wag whom they once so dearly loved !”

“Silly child !” said the sage Jock ; “when a man laughs and jests the world smiles back in his face. Get cross and stupid, and the world scowls back at you with all its thick-witted malice. Which is the reason, perhaps,” he added, with a touch of his old liveliness, “why the world hath this long time past appeared to me so dark and stern.”

“Poor, poor Jock !” said Molly, kissing his forehead.

“Bah !” said Jock, pushing her away ;
“see you not that Mistress Nan is coming this way, and as glad and quiet as an angel ?”

And indeed, when I looked up and saw her coming, her countenance was most serene. The fire of her eyes was as keen as ever, and to a close observer bore witness to much thought and suffering. But her lips were wreathed and set in a calm smile. She carried some eggs in a basket, which she intended to bestow upon her father and husband, since she had become a notable keeper of poultry. So she advanced, moving cheerfully and delighting herself with her kind intention. But on catching sight of me she started with a look of horror and dropped the basket, so that most of the eggs broke. There was a

slight frost on the ground, and a confusion of yolk and shell seemed suddenly to glue itself to the road.

“Woe’s me!” cried Nan, “even my simple little gift is ruined.”

When I drew near to greet her, she caught me by the left arm with both her hands and said piteously, “Ah, brother and friend! you do not come as a tempter, do you? As an emissary from your master?”

I thought her wits must be wandering. “What is this, Nancy?” I said earnestly. “My lord means you no harm.”

“I know,” she answered, drawing me away towards the church-fields; “he meaneth nothing. It is three years since I saw him; but if he ever should—ah! you don’t understand. Let us come back to the forge.”

I was indeed puzzled by her words. Could she really have loved my lord? A little harmless dalliance seemed indeed to have flattered her vanity on the day that ended in her betrothal. But I never doubted her deep affection for Dagonet. "Let me," I cried to her, as she was entering the inn, "visit you in your cottage this afternoon. Tell Dagonet how impatient I am to see him." Then I joined Molly, and together we walked to the church. Alas! I could not even then speak to her of what was nearest my heart. Several years had still to run their course ere the change of things put an end to my wandering life, and I, obtaining a position of trust in a public office, was enabled to make Molly my wife, and to find in her, as I always expected, my truest helpmate

and friend. But to-day as we reached the graveyard, Mistress Ashton, the aunt of Molly, came upon our view suddenly from behind a yew-tree. She was much aged, and her arms, that had used to stick out always from her sturdy sides, were crossed in front of her, and holding together a large cloak that had drooped over her bowed and mighty shoulders. She had come from weeping at her sister Needham's grave. Long years had passed since Molly became motherless, but Aunt Ashton had never ceased grieving. She had had her way with her husband, her brother-in-law, her nephew and niece. She had stung the most part of the village into submission with her words and glances. But her gentle sister had always controlled and well-nigh awed her. However fiercely

she might be raving, her sister had but to show herself, and the virago was abashed in an instant.

But it was in no way lucky for us that we met her fresh from lamenting over the "one good creature whom her Creator had allowed her to know." Feeble and tear-stained as her face was, a look, not of anger indeed but of wild, distracted loathing, came over it in an instant at sight of us.

"So here they are!" she exclaimed; "the silly wench that slew her mother, and the friend of fools and foreigners! A curse on this thankless generation!"

She moved away from us, muttering and shaking her fists.

"Out alas!" cried Molly. "I never saw her quite so bad as that. But it has

been long coming. How all is changed, dear Aaron! Is a 'strong delusion,' as the Scriptures call it, really come upon us that we all 'believe a lie,' all believe that our brothers' and sisters' hearts are turned from us? I fear so, Aaron; and the cause of all is the wickedness that read to men a devil's gospel—'Fear not God, and dishonour the King.'"

What could I do but kiss her? But it was the last kiss I took before we were betrothed. And that befell in a London house where Molly was afterwards living with Madam Nancy, as you shall hear when all the rest is told.

In the sexton's house farmer Ashton was taking what comfort he could for the madness of his wife by cheering the loneliness of his friend. Jock, indeed, would

come as often as he could to stand like a straight pillar under the roof of his little chattering and shrunken father. Master Sexton always leapt and sprang sideways instead of walking forwards. Now that he was old he would often get down his spade and lean on it with his foot up as if digging. In that way he could keep himself still, and carry on talk with his friends. Otherwise he would bob about more restlessly than ever, till quite tired he sank into the settle and slept for a good hour at a time. He was sleeping like that when Molly and I entered. But presently he woke with a start and exclaimed, "Yes, brother Ashton, we were all wrong. There was never anything contrary to religion and virtue in either Nancy or the jester. Poor, poor creatures!" I then, on hear-

ing this, could not but dart forward and wring the hand of that good little old man, who did not, however, live to be my father-in-law. Master Ashton, for his part, caught me a tap of the head with his crab-stick out of pure affection.

“Thou’lt rob ’un yet of his best treasure,” said he; “but when wilt leave thy gadding and scholarding to settle down with her on thy mother’s lap? There’s mothers and mothers, but Mother Earth beats ’em all for faithfulness and lastingness. Yet off you run!”

“Well, well,” I said, a little impatiently, “every man to his trade!”

“So said Master Dagonet, I warrant me, when he first took to fooling. But fooling is a sore rent in a man’s honour, and a score of years’ cobbling will not

mend it. And in good sooth your learning and land-leaping is nought but a kind of fooling. Take you heed, lad."

"Aaron will take fast enough heed, Uncle Ashton," said Molly; "but tell me now when he can best find Dagonet. He told Nancy he should come, but asked not about their occasions."

"Well, leave me not," cried the sexton, "till Jock is here to comfort me. He will come early to-day, and go afterwards into Trentwick about some cunning work he hath now on hand."

All that smith could ever accomplish in this our lesser world was Jock now master of. Vulcan in Greece might perhaps far surpass him; but Weyland in Britain would have been no match for him, even in that rapid shoeing of horses which is

the boast of his countryside. This I say, having seen the light first in an excellent blacksmith's forge, and having examined all such work in Germany and Italy with much care and interest. Lastly, I can tell you that the new gates at Sandy Hall, wrought in imitation of leaves and stalks and stems, a massive and twining foliage, are the very and sole handiwork of Jock Needham.

When another hour had gone by, the said Jock came in. Thereupon I pressed Molly's hand as an adieu, and slipped out to pay Master Dagonet the promised visit. Reaching his cottage I found the door half open, and stepping into its shadow a rattling assailed my ears and a smell of tobacco my nostrils. Looking in I saw through the cloud of smoke a most singular scene.

With his back to me, and dressed in his old jester's suit, sat Dagonet, the married cobbler, drinking in tobacco, and making sharp strokes in the air with his bauble. Facing me, with a window-sill at her right hand, where were set holly-boughs and yew-twigs in a rich confusion, sat Nancy his wife. She had just been giving suck to her little boy, and her right breast shone through the firelight and blue smoke like sea-foam of a creamy gold, blown suddenly into a glorious orb and touching the sea-floor like another sun. Instantly, when she heard a step, she covered that beauty with a broad white tippet, smooth and starched, after the precisian pattern.

Yet still she bent her sweet face with its radiant smile over her little son, and they three seemed to be praising God in the

midst of the fire like the holy children. As Dagonet pretended to strike at him with his bauble, the little boy, whose face was white as ivory and pleasantly replete, bobbed back and forwards from his hips with both his little fists held up. And this, you see, was the second time that I knew of Dagonet's taking tobacco. Why he did it I cannot precisely say. But I believe that he wished once more to review his life, and hand on to his son some better if he could. This life he parcelled not into maxims, but sprinkled fresh drops of it from his bauble, as a Roman priest uses an aspergile.

"Be merry, little knave," he cried, "but take to thee early the garment of wisdom and the mask of gravity!"

"That shall he not, Dagonet," said

Nancy; "see you what I have made him." And she rose quickly, hurrying with the child on her arm to a cupboard far back beside the fire. Here she turned over clothes and linen for some time, and then crouched down and set the child before her. I could not see what she was doing; but after a few minutes she called to Dagonet that he should light a candle. And there we were all four discovered—the youngest of us dressed in a little suit of motley, with a tiny bauble in his hand. Nancy saw me, but made me a sign to be quiet. Then were the two jesters, father and son, brought solemnly into each other's presence, and they knocked together their baubles right merrily.

On Dagonet's was carved the head of a demon, with a grinning mouth, which the

Fool had christened his Momus, little of real taxation as his mirth ever admitted. On the child's was carved a dove with out-spread wings. It was Jock who had made it, as I guessed. "Little Evangelist," said the Fool; "Messenger of Peace!"

"And a true friend he announces to us!" said Nan. "Look round, Dagonet."

Then did they make much of me, calling me brother and defender, and mourning that I had not returned in time to be sponsor to their son. Nancy became wild with joy, kissing her two jesters, one after the other.

"And now," she said, "that you have seen us as we really are, tell the world that we are the happiest and lovingest family in the valley. And now let us deck our-

selves soberly, that the grave world may tax us no longer of folly!" Quickly she changed back the baby's dress into a habit that was almost priestly in the whiteness of bib and tucker, and set him at the table on a tall stool, while she secured him from falling with various strings. Then she took down a large Bible and laid it on the table, bringing the candle near to it. "Fill thy pipe, Aaron," she cried. I obeyed her, and sat in the chair which Dagonet had just left. He, for his part, had gone to shift his clothes, and he returned soon in his leathern jerkin, and carrying in his hand a large bundle.

"I must forth," he said; "but do thou stay with the wife."

"What art thou carrying?" asked Nan.

"Merely some rubbish of my trade,

which I propose to cast away. That unaccustomed herb has made me a thought giddy. I go to take the air, and spell out on the gravestones the names of some of my dead cronies."

"Come hither, then," said Nance. He came, as one whose legs carry him but uncertainly and dreamily, kissed his wife tenderly on the forehead with a "God for ever bless thee, sweet one!" and quickly departed.

When he had gone, Nancy sat down at the table and opened slowly the large and dusty Bible. I, for my part, took from my pocket the sheets of a Latin discourse on "Table Behaviour in Modern Republics, with some Reflections on Dede-kindus," which I was on the point of issuing from the Leyden Press; presently

I looked up, however, and saw Nancy reading hard in her Bible, and holding her child with her left hand. The candle shone upon her smooth white tippet and the handkerchief over her dark brown hair, and like a centre of light to the room was that gentle and composed picture. I thought with myself that she must be reading that homely and godly tale of the child Samuel, who listens dutifully for the priest's voice, and finds that it is God speaking to him through the night. But when after a space I took a brother's right and looked over her shoulder, what was my surprise to find that she was reading in the prophet Ezekiel, and following with sad devotion those stern rebukes to adulterous Jerusalem and wanton Samaria.

“Whereabouts, sister?” I asked gently.

She pointed quietly with her finger, and I read, "For whom thou didst wash thyself, paintedst thy eyes, and deckedst thyself with ornaments."

"That didst thou never, Mistress Nan," I said earnestly; "it is nought to thee." Whereupon she pointed back to these other words, "Captains and rulers clothed most gorgeously, horsemen riding upon horses, all of them desirable young men."

"Canst thou remember nothing?" she said, very fearfully.

By a strange chance, as I thought, there flashed back into my memory the image of my lord on horseback and Nancy holding up to him the flagon.

"Nay, nay; yet I remember indeed a goodly young man riding upon a horse, and I remember that this morning you

entreated me to be no tempter to you. But assure yourself, I beg ; my lord can have no designs."

"Nay, and he never had. The more shame to me for my wicked greeting of him. Surely on the day that I was betrothed to Dagonet I would have hung up all my ornament and glory in high places. I was even like those idolatrous and evil women. His youth and beauty filled me with a longing for courts and revelry and pride. I would have purchased them with all the jewels my Saviour gave me—brightness and shapeliness, meekness and quietness, the grace and daring that were given me to win souls. Out upon me! I would have dragged through the mire that beautiful crown of God's setting"—she drew closer

under her kerchief a gleaming wisp of hair—"and well had I merited that the 'great company' should come up and crush me under avenging stones."

"But all this was the thought of a moment," I said, "or at most the dream of a morning. It vanished when Dagonet told thee his care for thee, and gave thee his cherishing."

"True enough, Aaron. But that *I* should have been even for an instant so ready to abandon myself."

"Is there not pride in that?" I asked softly. "Which of us is secure against falling?"

"Nay, and that is true also," she admitted; "but I had thought so long on serious things. Your father had drawn for me so bright and fair a picture of a

godly woman. And yet there grew up in me so rank a sense of some endless torture, and again of some gorgeous uncertain glory, that I became restless and unbearable to my mother and to all. Then came my soul's Death, and riding on a pale horse. Gay were his trappings, and like the sunlight was his face. But if the eternal Satan himself had taken that shape he would have been stronger than me—stronger than Christ who died for me."

"And would still?" I inquired sadly, and looked pitifully on her child.

"Nay, not that," she answered proudly, and clasped that child of hers with passion to her heart.

"But what then," I pursued sternly, "was the meaning of your words about temptation, as though I, your poor

Aaron, might haply be a messenger of sin?"

"Partly," was her slow reply, "I feared horribly lest the sight of him who had been to me incarnate evil might cast my soul into that lowest depth of despair, from whence is no arising. And partly," she added, with a shy trembling, "I feared lest that once simple Aaron might have been corrupted by the air of courts and a false devotion to his master. And that, my brother, would have been the bitterest drop of all. Even if I myself must needs be lost and perish, I could not bear that the son of him who had been my father in God, should also become wicked and a castaway."

"I trust in God it may never fare so with either you or me, Nancy. But little

good is there in dwelling on thoughts like that. Think not, my precious sister, that our Master Christ is powerless to abide with us when the liberal School openeth to us her doors and the graceful Court her ante-chambers. Do you see in me either pride or wantonness, dear Nancy?"

"Neither, my good Aaron," she answered blithely, "but would that Dagonet could minister thus to my soul. Then would all that great love of mine find words and wings for his ears. Then should I no longer feel he might justly tax me with hypocrisy. I have striven again and again to shrive me to him; again and again have I dropped in his path some melancholy half-phrase, shadowing dimly a time when I was not truly

worthy of his honest heart. But he only pats me and strokes me with 'Good child ! good child ! I do most exceedingly love thee. And what a heart is thine too, Nanny ! Be merry, and love me as thou canst.' "

"Poor Nancy !" I said with a smile ;
"what cruel words are these !"

"Ay ! but the truest kindness were to absolve me and let my soul be clear, that he might read therein the wholeness and pureness of my love. What wonder that one who is darkened and saddened with sin should seem like a sullen and thankless wife, so that he ever and anon fleeth me ? Then does some prying black-hearted neighbour find me in tears, and after she hath told me I am a foolish and petulant woman, goeth straightway into

this little world of Thorn Abbey and spreadeth her rumour that Dagonet is a wicked, shameful, and cruel husband. Let him shrive me! Let him shrive me!"

"Nay, Nancy," I exclaimed with as much cheerfulness as I could muster, "Dagonet was born into a world which left confession to the parson. Much of his life was lived before every man was fain to be considered a priest, and when even the priest could look with smiling on May games and May blossoms. My mother was another such forest changeling, and minded her, as Dagonet doth still, of the green and growing earth, though my father could see nothing but the blackness of the Ironsides' empire between our tender lives and the avenging fires of God."

“Nay, but thy father was no adherent of Oliver’s.”

“Surely thou knowest best, Mistress Nancy. But I think of a truth that latterly he held the Protector’s sway to be at least a just punishment for backslidings. But that, most honoured friend, regards us not now. I aim but at one thing, Nancy,—to set Dagonet and you in favour again with all, in peace and happiness with yourselves.”

“You have done much, brother,” answered Nancy—“have done much good to my heart ; for you have listened to my open confession.”

“And now cast away the memory,” I urged her. “I can assure you out of every treatise of ethic or casuistry, from Spanish Suarez to Spanish-Dutch Spinoza,

that so unpausing a thought in so limpid a mind as yours can be no breach of God's law or man's. It is a shadow of a shadow."

"Then oh!" cried Nancy, "that the sun of love would arise and scatter it, that what is inward in my heart be also outward in my form and moving. Where can I find him? Where has he gone?" she cried, and rushed to the window, whose casement she pushed open, while she brushed aside the yew and crushed up the holly in her hands, without heeding the pricks she received.

She had actually forgotten her child. With the heaviness of fatigue he would have slipped off his stool and hung by his strings to the table, had not Aaron with a calmer foresight taken him from his seat

and laid him on the floor to sprawl. Then I followed Mistress Nancy to the window. The moon was glittering on the frosty ground, but the wood and the church and the fields were as quiet and still as death.

“Let us go and seek him,” I gently whispered in her ear. We drew open the door between us. A small tangle of mist was involving itself round the moon. The first thawings of the hard-bound road clung impedingly to our shoes.

“Which way?” she asked helplessly.

“On!” I cried at a venture. And she passed before me into the church-fields.

In that ghostly pallor it seemed to me that a twilight of the spirit had indeed fallen on England. The conscience-stricken plaining mother at my side was a type of the new woman, in whom the sense of sin

was to be the predominant feature. Yet *I*—even *I*, the hater of precisian scruples, could not but feel it to be natural. For on the other side there rose in my mind an image of my lord, and what he was growing to be. How had youth and merriment and accomplishment and daring faded away from him, leaving only the hardened and sneering pursuer of pleasure and advancement! To me indeed he showed still, as I have said, both steadfastness and kindness. But what a world was that in which he moved! Innocence to him was a helpless ignorance, which it behoved him to enlighten and strengthen. What a brilliant and destructive glory awaited those twin-children of wisdom, the harlot and the thief—not those blithe denizens of the Beggar's Bush, the stage offspring of

Master John Fletcher, creatures who retained still a human heart — but those greater, diviner, and more august, the harlot of the Christian Court and the thief of the Sacred College! Already astir in all lands was that demon of remorseless greed that plays the Vice in our newer comedy. And the quieter souls meanwhile sat horror-struck in the Gorgon glitter of a superstitious and self-tormenting creed. I mourned, as I might the departed sun, that lettered and gracious king, who, whatever his errors, had been a true head to that Church which Christ, through Augustine, had set as it were on the cliffs of Kent. Who would walk by the starlight of schism, when he had but to wait for the sunlight of royalty and religion? A schismatic, however, was our

only guide at present. As we neared the graveyard there met us that dispenser of sour formulæ, Master Shimei Sanderson, now the incumbent of the parish.

“What seekest thou, O daughter of Samaria?” he exclaimed, with a twanging snarl; “I met that ribald spouse of thine even now, as he went up to the high place, left to us for our sins by the Popish idolators, that cave of the rocks, where a blasphemous leather-cutter took unto himself the name of holy, that the foolish people might worship the ground he trod on.”

The hermit had indeed been a leather-cutter of Trentwick. But would that the saintly mechanics of our later times had been as peaceful and harmless in their ways! We felt certain now that Dagonet

must have returned to the rocky cell, where he had passed the vigil of his settling in Thorn Abbey. And slowly we made our way up to that sacred spot, the leafless beech-trees shivering as we went.

The cave was in utter darkness, and not a sound reached us. But Nancy, laying her hand by chance on one of the slits or windows, of which I spoke at the beginning of my tale, felt a long thick torch. This, by the aid of flint and steel, we lighted; but, for all its pitchy flare, could discover no one. Then a kind of desperation seized on my friend, and she called in a loud and wailing tone, "Dagonet! Dagonet! my love! my love! come to me. It is cold here, Dagonet." The torch was burning low. The frosty ground, the enveloping darkness, the grinding of bare

branches were like symbols of death to the troubled woman, whose whole heart was now athirst for light and love and summer. "Dagonet! Dagonet!" once again through the rattling boughs. "Thorn Hanger!" she said, pausing in her cries; "it is a merry place in June. It was here that, as a child, I first saw Dagonet. The old lord had come over to visit him. He had dressed him in his motley suit, and a falcon sat on his fist. He was flying it for my lord's pleasure. And now—now—he is flown himself!" She burst out into bitter weeping. But there was no time to lose. I saw that a heap of brushwood had been laid in a corner of the cave. I lit it with the expiring torch; and just as it blazed up I noticed what looked like a pair of ass's ears sticking up out of a scattered

mass that lay a little beyond the heap. Coming nearer, I saw that a bell was attached to each.

It then dawned on me that these were the ears or peaks of a jester's hood, and without question Dagonet's. I caught hold of them and pulled up the whole dress. We both of us understood then the meaning of Dagonet's last words and of the bundle that he carried. Then suddenly the flames caught the garment as I held it. Startled at this, I dropped my hold of the ears, and being made of a soft porous stuff, with many trimmings of silk and satin, the whole was soon consumed. It was plain, however, from the position where we found it that this had been Dagonet's intention. Then a little nearer to the centre of the cave I noticed a piece of

card stuck into the cleft of a faggot, and scrawled on it with a charred stick were these words, "SACRED TO THE ASHES OF FOLLY." At another time we could have smiled at such a native example of our dear jester's whim. But now we were rooted to the spot. I for my part felt as if here were indeed the grave of all that was glad and happy and ripe, of all that had sweetness and sap and soundness in this English life of ours. The spell of this mournful musing was rudely broken. For Nancy remembered on the sudden that she had left her little son alone in the cottage. I told her that I had set him on the floor, and as he was fastened to the heavy table he could come to little harm. But for all that Nancy set off running, as the child would now be grieving for her. I followed

her quickly. And as the distance was indeed not great, we were soon once more in the cottage.

The little fellow was perfectly happy. And very quickly did his mother lay him in his cot and hush him to sleep for the night. Then knew she not where to turn, but bade me leave her. So I went out at the door and took the right hand towards the forge. Outside of it Jock met me, and when I told him that Dagonet was strayed, said that he had met him in the churchyard about an hour since. The Fool, who was spelling out names by the aid of a torch he had somewhere found, cried out on seeing him, "Ah! for this goodly company of my friends who lie below, Master Blenkinsop and his wife, your mother Mistress Need-

ham, and a score of others. There will be no such cronies for me again. They reminded me never of my dishonour. And they who are left can think of nothing else."

"Nay, Dagonet," had Jock replied, "there is no dishonour in a jester's coat."

"Ay, but there is," said Dagonet, "for a sorry crew are they who have worn it. They have been puffed up with a scurvy pride about nothing, and snarl at their brother hounds for their lords' favour, 'One is woe that another by the door should goe.' And they play such tricks as Will Summers played when he threw the milk in Jack Oates's face, or show some impish piece of greed, like the said Jack Oates with the pie."

"But I remember another saying in the book where those tales stand, that merry

and moral tract of Master Arnim's, which you lent me years ago. The signification of some jest is, he says, this: 'that fools' questions reach to mirth, leading wisdom by the hand, as age leads children by one finger, and though it holds not fast in wisdom, yet it points at it.'"

"And I truly," said Dagonet, "have pointed at wisdom, as a rat nailed by the ears doth point at honesty. I have warned all that come after me to beware of putting on ass's ears on pain of recovering never their human shape."

"Far from that, Dagonet; thou art the most human amongst us. For most do at this time bend them from their erect form over sordid and grovelling tasks, or distort themselves like madmen at the terror of future judgment. And thou hast

for these long years performed busily thy daily tasks, sent us all well shod on our pilgrimages of grace, and had a smile and a jest for us towards evening."

"Be that thy benediction, most dexterous Jock. As for me I go to sing my *Nunc dimittis* in the Eremite's ancient lodging."

"Whereat," said Jock, "he gave a great chuckle and left me."

Once again before turning in I went round to Nan's cottage. But she had no tidings, and besought me to rest. So, sorely weary, I fell asleep once more in my little loft, and in the dim light towards six o'clock I was woken by bustle and sounds of distress that echoed to me from the street, though I lay far away from it. So wrapping myself in a few garments I

stole down through the silent house, and found outside a band of labourers running about all scared, and whining and quarrelling with each other. I asked with much authority for the meaning of this behaviour; and when they had looked at each other with doubt, anger, and discontent in their glances, one of them sung out, as he drew a breath across his closed teeth, "Follow us, master, an't please you." It was now freezing again as hard as ever. I set off in their train, shivering and stamping on the ground for warmth. We neared the graveyard, and a surly fellow, dashing open the wicket, pointed to leftward with his extended palm. I made up to him, and saw in an instant that he was pointing in the direction of my mother's grave. I walked reverently

towards it, and the surly fellow with a younger clown followed me slowly, and shaking with fear. When clear of a fence of tombstones, a sad and horrible sight was before me—which was none other than poor Dagonet, seated on the wide low-lying stone that shielded my parents' rest, and dead as any stone himself.

My first thought was that there had been foul play. And turning round on the clowns, who were labourers at the Ashtons' farm, asked them if they or their mistress knew aught of this.

"Eh, master," said the surly one, "see you not he is starved to death? One of our mates saw 'un late in the evening, a-pacin' th' old leaping-green up above the hanger. And sure the night air caught him as he sat down to rest."

“E’en so, my friends, and I am sorry I spoke so sharply. But who will tell his poor wife?”

“Why, I went in but now,” said another, “and there was Mistress Nan sitting asleep in all her clothes by her bairn’s cot. No noise could wake her, and I hadn’t the heart to bawl it out.”

So they were a little sorry after all. The tide of kindness would surely flow back again. It had begun to flow on the evening before in the hearts of the farmer and sexton. As for Mother Ashton, God who had stricken her wits must pardon her wickedness. But there sat Dagonet, stark as eternal fate. I seized his frozen hands and kissed them. I bound up his chin with the cloth that had held his motley. When I came to

close those eyes, dead now to all the reflected shapes that had danced there, I saw still those strange variegated markings in their brown width, like tawny water-weeds that cling about the pebbles of some grass-hidden freshet. I propped him against an upright gravestone overshadowing my mother's. And I felt that he too, who had sung *Nunc dimittis* at eventide, was now in that better life with my frolic mother and noble father.

But Nancy! I can only tell you now of our sad chill-hearted breakfast, and how she restrained her grief and busied herself with little Justin—for so the infant was called. And her air was always this: “Now I understand—now I am absolved.” Nothing, she was sure, could have saved Dagonet. He had determined—not indeed

to die, but to hide himself. And after a day or two he would have left Thorn Abbey for good, convinced he could never make her happy.

“And the child?” I asked, almost frowning with bewilderment; “and you?”

“Oh, he would have sent us enough for our support, and come back now and again to see us. And as time went on he would have trusted me to *your* counsel for the rearing of little Justin. And that you will give me now, will you not, brother Aaron?”

I gave it her most constantly as the years advanced; and I found that gradually the last traces of my father's gloomy teaching vanished from Nancy's heart, and she became glad that her son grew up with a firm and sober fidelity to

Church and King—a most erudite divine, and a most elegant and correct poet. But, for all these happy and peaceful issues, the price paid seemeth to me still a cruel one. For I think ever of the sap of the merry greenwood and the life stream of England's wanton revelry frozen suddenly in Dagonet's beloved form, on the tomb of my own kindred in a harsh December night.

I have only one more scene, and that is above sixteen years after. Molly and I had been long married, but we were not blessed with children. My employment was near Whitehall, but our lodging was

in Knight-Rider Street, and looked upon the fair and stately Thames. But Nancy and her son were living in Long Lane, nigh upon Aldersgate Street. Through my interest with one of the governors young Justin had been admitted to Christ's Hospital, and was by this time a famous Grecian. It was on a Saturday evening in summer, when my labours were over for the week, that Molly and I set off northwards to visit Mistress Nan. The little room where she sat was beautiful with many sorts of flowers, that she had disposed herself in bowls of cut glass.

She had just lighted a candle, and was mending a pair of her son's yellow stockings. Her hair was just streaked with gray, and she wore no cap or kerchief. All we could see of her dress was a broad

white tippet of the kind I have before mentioned. The fire of her eyes was not quenched, but the rest of her face was quieter and more massive than of old, and her striking features wore now habitually an air of singular nobility. At a secretary in the further corner sat Justin, writing busily at a theme. We had scarcely greeted when sounds reached us from the street below of some violent scuffling and scolding. Listening more carefully to the tones, it seemed to be some roystering gallant, who was struggling with the watch. As Nancy had small regard for such gentry, she would fain have closed and stuffed tight the casement, that we might be no longer deafened. But suddenly the gallant broke free, and was scampering up her stairs for sanctuary.

The door was but lightly latched, so that in another moment he burst in upon us.

“What is this, my fine fellow?” quoth Nancy. “You must not think you are in Alsatia.”

And Justin rose too, bold as a lion, and would have thrust out the *desperado* by the head and shoulders, more particularly as he was far gone in liquor.

As for me, I perceived soon that the watch were following in a lumbering and confused fashion. So, determined that we should not have the scuffle repeated within doors, I confronted them at the stairhead, and demanded sternly what had been the gentleman’s offence. It appeared that he, with some fellow-roysterers, had frightened out of his wits a goldsmith in Barbican by pretending to commit a robbery on his

stall. Everything had been restored ; but the goldsmith's wife had fainted with terror, and this gentleman had wounded one of the speaker's fellows with his sword. The wound, however, was slight. And I easily persuaded them to go away, with some alacrity too, when I all but hinted that this was very like some boon-companion of my Lord Rochester's. And so indeed it turned out ; for it was no other than my old master, Lord Sandiacre. He was now the merest drunkard, finding no other exercise for his wits but in such mad exploits as he had now been about, save that he occasionally translated for the Duke's Theatre some new French masque, which he plentifully interspersed with all the ribaldries of watermen and bona-robas. My lord had fallen upon a couch ; but he

presently opened his eyes and recognised Mistress Nancy.

“Avaunt!” he cried in a voice of drunken horror. “Why art thou thus? A matron, by heaven!—a Cornelia! What have you done to deserve honours? Just look at me! Have I not walked in the paths of Apollo and Venus and all the Graces—sworn brother to Bacchus, and one that tweaks old Time by his frowzy forelock—and, after all, I am a sort of dull, decayed, melancholy soused herring—a plague on the gods! Here are you, Madam Nanny, who have done nought more deserving than sit and sew and sigh, teach a son and trip to a sermon,—here are you as bright and fair, and happy and honoured, as my Lady Thalia herself. By Phœbus and the Nine, it’s—it’s—*damnable!*”

Here my lord would have rolled off to sleep again. But Justin and I between us got him down to a coach, and directed the fellow to my lord's lodgings in St. James's. My sweet little Molly, who was crying with terror and distress at so shameful a spectacle, said that he ought by rights to have been left considerably in the gutter.

When we were settled again, I looked over Justin's shoulder at his theme, and found that it was a Latin poem that he was writing for a prize, in memory of the wife of one of the hospital governors. The poem was in the manner and measure of Lucretius, and described the life and surroundings of the pious and kindly lady with the finished concentration and luminous softness of a Dutch oil-work. I could see

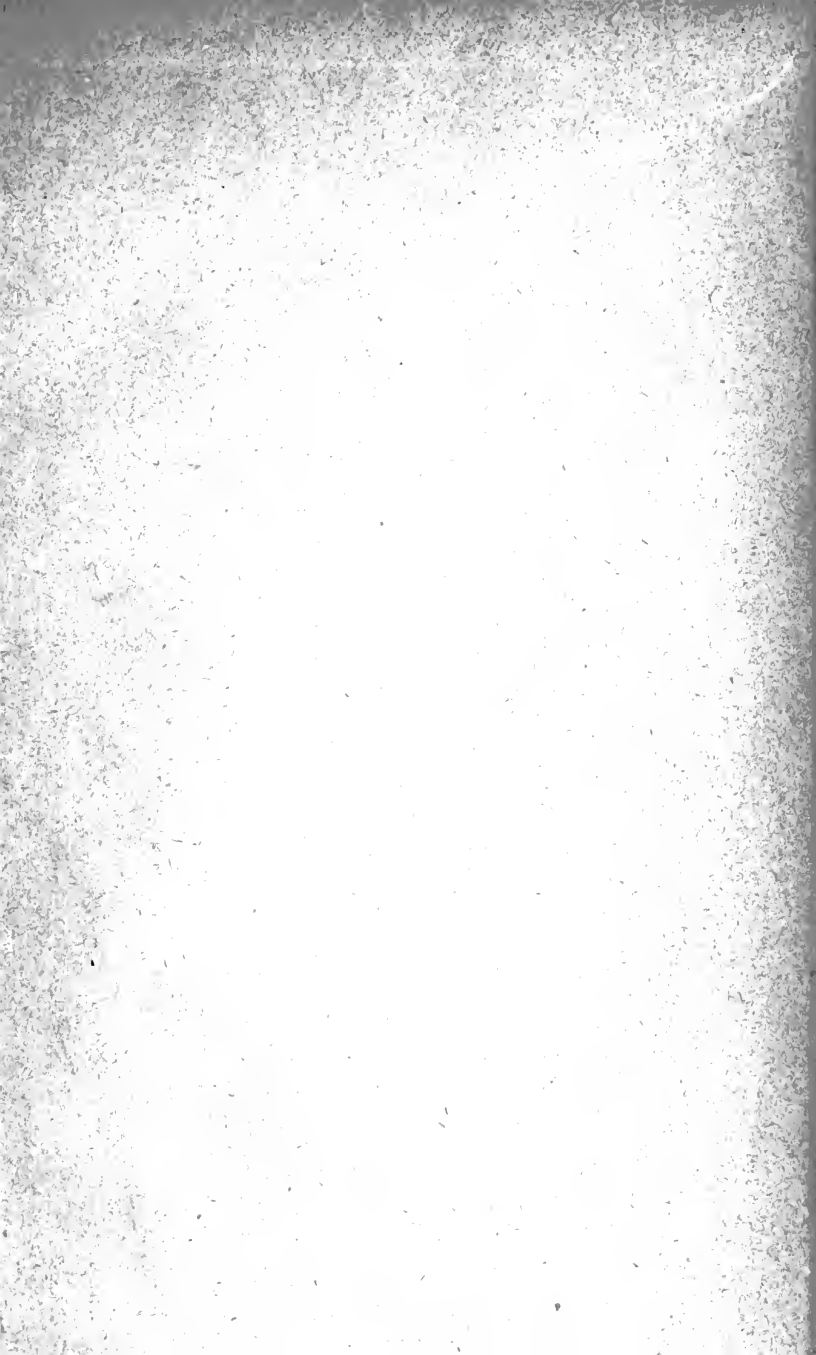
whence he drew that familiar vein, that inspiration of the Lares and Penates, of the spinning-room bustle and parlour chatter, which have given a peculiar grace to his English as to his Latin muse. The tutor of St. Hilda's, Oxford, remembers still his mother's little sitting-room in Long Lane.

We rose to take our leave. And as Molly released Nancy from her warm embrace (the two women had most dearly loved each other since their living together after the sexton's death) I saw on that face, glowing with affection, the traces of her indissoluble union in spirit with her lost jester, which had lasted ever since his hard and bitter death. Hard and bitter in its earthly accidents, but sweet to his immortal spirit, since his shrewd rustic

mirth, inspiring the sober gravity of the girl-Puritan he had married, woke in her the atoning persuasion that for many wounds of the soul a brave cheerfulness is better than the waters of affliction.

THE END.

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[Macmillan, Malcolm Kingsley,
Dagonet the jester

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